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# Out in the cold: examining northern and rural teachers' preparedness for teaching LGBT students

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Out in the Cold:  
Examining Northern and Rural Teachers' Preparedness  
for Teaching LGBT Students

Anthony Jeethan, 0490145

A thesis submitted to the faculty at Lakehead University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education in the Faculty of Education.

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## **Abstract**

In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education extended teacher training programs across the province with the goal of improving student mental health, well-being and addressing diversity issues. Climate surveys have consistently shown the need for the need for these interventions; particularly for queer youth, especially those in rural areas. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how well rural preservice teachers are prepared to interact and support LGBT youth. A single-case design method was employed, in which six preservice teachers participated in a workshop on inclusivity practices, then subsequently contrasted their pre-workshop knowledge of these topics through a retrospective group interview. This study examines perceived barriers that these preservice teachers experience in employing inclusivity practices in their professions. Findings from this study have the potential to help refine teacher education programs, as well as to provide direction for rural-specific interventions to support LGBT-inclusive education.

## Acknowledgements

Though this research represents a large passion of mine, and work that I've dedicated my career to, it proved to be one of the more difficult things I have attempted to do. With this being said, I feel it necessary to give my profound gratitude to a few people.

First and foremost, I'd like to offer my sincere thanks to the participants of this study for speaking so frankly in the interviews, and being open to discussing their backgrounds, no matter how uncomfortable. Without their input, this work would have been pure conjecture.

My colleagues within the faculty of education were frequently my sounding boards for developing research ideas, or helping me navigate around roadblocks that occurred. Being surrounded by such a supportive faculty is a privilege that I am positive many researchers would be envious of. To my examiners, Dr. Tanya Kaefer, Dr. Katherine Kortes-Miller, and Dr. Marg Schneider, I am forever grateful for the feedback you have given in this work. I only hope that one day I can provide the same care and expertise that you have to another student.

The process of completion for this study was fraught with roadblocks. When I look back on the person I was when starting this project, to the person I am now, I am frankly surprised to see I've made it! Even with through an extended leave, I have had the support of some amazing people to help see me through to the end of this project. I have to express my most sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton, for his

constant support, encouragement, and countless revisions in this study. Thank you for helping me see the light at the end of the tunnel when I could not fathom its sight.

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## **Chapter One: Research Introduction and Rationale**

This study focuses on Lakehead University's Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program; specifically, how well its graduates are being prepared to provide inclusive learning spaces for sexual and gender minority youth. Although such young people may not always be open about their sexualities or gender variations in school systems, they exist in classrooms, regardless of whether or not they have chosen to disclose their identities at school. As a workshop instructor for the Faculty of Education, I have continually noticed that students enrolled in the B.Ed. program lack basic knowledge about queer topics. In recent years, participants in my workshops have noted that some instructors have attempted to incorporate more of this type of knowledge into their teaching practice.

In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education (MoE) mandated that B.Ed. programs within the province would be extended to two years from one. Introduced at Lakehead in 2015, the two-year program was implemented not only to address an overage of unemployed qualified teachers, but also to give new teachers more in-class experience to prepare them for the challenges they may face in the field (Ontario MoE, 2013). The Ontario College of Teachers expanded on these challenges, citing that a stronger focus was needed on "student diversity, mental health, and well-being" (2015). One such challenge new teachers continue to face is in meaningfully supporting the identities of



gender and sexual minority youth, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans (LGBT<sup>1</sup>) students in their classrooms. In reviewing course descriptions and syllabi of the new program at Lakehead University, I have found that little remains in curriculum that specifically focuses on gender and sexuality issues. For instance, out of a possible 5.25 full-course equivalent (FCE) common core credits taken in the B.Ed. program, only 0.5 FCE credits are designated towards broad-spectrum inclusive education practices; this remains unchanged from the previous one-year model (Lakehead, 2016).

Lakehead University, being a northern and relatively isolated institution, is especially in need of inclusive education praxis. In similar situations, isolated areas that are traditionally rural tend to be more hostile environments for LGBT people (Jones, 2015; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; Palmer et al., 2012). The politics of rurality in Northern Ontario is not a currently well-researched field, but this study references other academic works that define traditional rurality for positioning. Rurality is not simply a matter of geographic area and population; in fact, based on those definitions, Thunder Bay would be considered an urban area. However, Thunder Bay, and surrounding areas of Northern Ontario, are all more in line with a defined 'rural culture', as described by Slama (2004). In her work, Slama defines a rural area as one that is relatively isolated, and has a lack of available social services. In the context of LGBT resources and supports, Thunder Bay is seemingly sparse. Compared to other urban centres, there is a lack of regular and scheduled face-to-face supports that queer communities can access. When researching the available support in Thunder Bay and surrounding area

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<sup>1</sup> This particular acronym was chosen as it is most commonly cited in Ministry of Education works and curriculum documents.

using the internet, I discovered that posted meeting times for LGBT services were extremely infrequent and had short windows of opportunity. In fact, in order to gain access to consistent face-to-face supports, LGBT youth would have to travel to the closest urban centres, Winnipeg (700 km) or Toronto (1400 km). Given this stratification of Thunder Bay in the north, out and questioning youth are truly left out in the cold. Though Thunder Bay fits a definition as an urban area based on a pure population analysis, it is surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of rural geography; and as such is a conglomerate of rural politics and identities. This is particularly true with health care, where Thunder Bay serves as a hub for the medical needs of surrounding smaller communities.

A final note to be considered that supports the characterization of Thunder Bay as a rural area is the Rurality Index for Ontario (RIO), which is a ministry planning tool for the allocation of medical travel funding. For example, urban centres such as Mississauga and Toronto both receive RIO scores of 0 on a 100-point scale, while Thunder Bay earns a score of 9.7/100 (Ontario Ministry of Health, 2017). Though relatively low, Thunder Bay's score represents the lowest score in Northwestern Ontario. In fact, communities and subdivisions within the Thunder Bay organized district, such as Neebing and Shuniah, have much higher scores; 40 and 42, respectively (Ontario Ministry of Health, 2017) Given all of the above information, this study posits that Thunder Bay is in fact an area influenced by rural culture, and accordingly, tends to be quite socially homogenous like other rural areas.

This is not to say that Thunder Bay lacks diversity. Being an active resident of Thunder Bay for the past 10 years, I have witnessed a strong increase of diversity in the

population; however, the changes in diversity are often short-lived. The city houses a large transient population of students, who attend Confederation College, Lakehead University, or high school (if it is not available in the student's home community). Like clockwork, the city becomes more visibly diverse in the fall, only to fade back come late spring. Among the permanent residents of Thunder Bay, visible diversity is steadily growing but at a much slower rate than the migrant population. Census data has shown that the percent of visible minorities in Thunder Bay has increased from 0.8% to approximately 4%, from 2012 to 2016, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2012; 2016). The effect of this dynamic is a rather xenophobic attitude, where residents (mostly white) fear the change of their culture due to outsiders. Social media groups such as *The Real Concerned Citizens of Thunder Bay* and *Thunder Bay Dirty* on Facebook maintain large reader demographics, even though they have been subject to national news coverage for their blatant prejudicial and xenophobic sentiments (Barrera, 2017; Pang, 2015). The attitude displayed by some citizens of the city mimes the attitudes of some rural citizens in regard to social equity and diversity, in which inclusion leads to degradation of their culture (Jones, 2015; Leedy & Connolly, 2007). LGBT youth, specifically school aged children, are not part of the transient population in Thunder Bay, but, nevertheless, they need inclusion to thrive.

Victimization of LGBT youth occurs frequently throughout North America, and is compounded in rural areas where there is little education about inclusivity (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011). Teachers are in a position where they can create social change in these areas by providing education and fostering

inclusion. Although Ontario teachers are bound to do this by “Bill 13” of the *Education Act* (2012), climate surveys suggest that this is not the case (Taylor et al., 2011).

### **Research Question**

As a teacher-educator and resident of Thunder Bay, I often think about the intersection of rural politics and teacher training. During my time at Lakehead University as a student, I learned the latter of the two rarely covered queer issues in schools. My research explores the following question: *What are the perceptions of rural preservice teachers on their preparation to teach and support LGBT students in their classrooms, as assessed through retrospective interviews?* By engaging rural preservice teachers in an inclusivity workshop on LGBT youth, subsequently conducting group interviews with them, and taking notes throughout the research process, I aimed to answer the question by chronicling the participants’ experiences in their B.Ed. program.

### **Research Rationale**

2019 marked fifty years since the police raids at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York. Thanks to the bravery and resistance in the face of oppression by Marsha P. Johnson and other queer activists, the Stonewall raid and subsequent riots became the precursor to modern gay rights in North America (Duberman, 1993).

Around the time of Stonewall, Canada had its own resistance mounting against LGBT oppression. During the Cold War era, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) conducted surveillance on LGBT people and had them removed from any public service jobs (Levy, 2018). At the time, the RCMP believed that sexual minorities had an inherent “character flaw”; if they worked in the public sector, they may be susceptible to blackmail by communist spies and thus were considered to be a threat to

the nation (Levy, 2018). One screening measure employed by the RCMP was colloquially termed 'the fruit test', in which suspected homosexuals were strapped into a dentist's chair and shown photographs of men and women while their pupil dilation was measured (Sawatsky, 1980). The test inaccurately associated pupil dilation with sexual stimulation, and was used as a basis to purge suspected homosexuals from the public employment sector (Knecht, 2018). Unfortunately, this was not limited to public employees. Many LGBT people were forcibly outed and registered in the RCMP database despite having no access to any classified material (Kinsman & Gentile, 2010). At the time, acts of homosexuality were considered to be "gross indecencies", a crime punishable under the Criminal Code of Canada (Kinsman, 1987). Though these acts were decriminalized in 1969 before the Stonewall riots, the continued poor treatment of LGBT Canadians prompted the first gay rights protest in 1971 (Kinsman, 1987). This is to say that though Canada has a reputation for being more 'liberal' than the United States, our civil rights timelines show that this is not necessarily true.

Since then, there have been leaps and bounds made in LGBT legal rights, most recently, the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015 (Canada had legalized marriage equality in 2005). The visibility of LGBT people has risen dramatically, with depictions of them being readily available on television, and many celebrities coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, seemingly on a daily basis.

Legal protections for LGBT youth are entrenched in various legislative acts, such as Bill 13 in Ontario. This bill, named *The Accepting Schools Act* (2012) provides students protections based on grounds of sexuality and gender identity. In America, this

situation differs slightly, as 29.5% of school districts have no anti-bullying policies, but of those that do, 73.0% of them offer some sort of protection to LGBT students (Kull, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2015). Though Ontario was advancing its support of LGBT youth in classrooms through curriculum changes, the newly instated Ford government has quickly redacted these interventions in classrooms, undermining years of work from both teachers and queer activists (Collaco, 2018).

Classrooms in schools have been described as among the most homophobic of public institutions (Allen, 2018; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Perhaps this is because most actions of power in classrooms can function to reinforce heterosexism such as teachers ignoring homophobic comments, teaching a mainly heteronormative curriculum, and enforcing policies which either directly or indirectly marginalize queer students (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). The resulting effect is that LGBT students can become disengaged from their school communities and their education in general.

In recent years, most discussions about sexual orientation in schools revolved around the detrimental effects of current educational practice on LGBT students, specifically related to their mental health, sexual risk behaviours, and substance use (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). In these discussions, the conversation is usually the same, and typically ends with a call for educators to collectively work together to create safe spaces; the logic being that safe-spaces will create positive mental health and will lower the elevated rates of LGBT suicides (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2013a; Kosciw et al., 2013b; Taylor et al., 2011).

The conversation on mental well-being is one that often gets the limelight because of the tragedies associated with it (Richardson, 2015). Saewyc (2007) reported that in Canada, 33% of sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth had attempted suicide, compared to 7% of their heterosexual counterparts. As a whole, LGBT youth are fourteen times more likely to be suicidal or abuse substances than their heterosexual peers, and are more likely to be the victims of hate crimes (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA], 2015). Kim and Leventhal (2008) suggest that the higher instance of LGBT suicides is partially related to the long-lasting effects of bullying these children tend to experience in schools. For instance, consider the tragic death of Leelah Alcorn of Kings Mills, Ohio, in December 2014. Prior to her death, Leelah wrote a letter explaining her decision to take her own life, citing the torment she experienced in school as a direct cause for her suicide ideation (Alcorn, 2014). Following her death, many people have used her story as a starting point for asking, "What could we have done to prevent this from happening?" Most discussions end with a simple call for improving mental health, but the underpinning issues are not readily discussed, such as class, place, and visibility (Baker, 2012). Aiming to have queer youth survive to see their adulthood is an admirable goal, but what kind of adulthood are they being prepared for? The effects of negative school climate are not simply limited to lower emotional well-being; they also have detrimental effects on the academic performance of LGBT children, which ultimately translates to the socioeconomic struggles of many LGBT adults (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2013b; Waite & Denier, 2015).

Although there has been advancement in LGBT education (e.g., safe school policies, gay-straight alliances, internet helplines), schools continue to be unsafe and hostile environments for many LGBT youth. In fact, most of these advancements generate substantial pushback from conservative, or self-described 'traditional' families. Consider the SOGI 123 movement, a Vancouver-based initiative to promote inclusive education and protections for students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. While championed by activists, many parents believed that the inclusion of this material was anti-Christian, and was feeding children 'pro-homosexual' ideology (Malcom, 2018).

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) launched the first national climate survey for LGBT youth in the US in 2013 and found that 74.1% of students were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, and that 55.5% of LGBT students felt unsafe at their schools (Kosciw et al., 2013a). Though this study was conducted with students in the United States, Canadian schools had similar results, as evident in EGALE Canada's National Climate Survey. The study found that 70% of Canadian LGBT students experienced verbal harassment, and that a staggering 64% of students felt unsafe in their schools (Taylor et al., 2011). Cases like Leelah's happen across both Canada and the United States daily, even if they are not publicized (Dennison, 2015).

With respect to Leelah's story, there has been a large discussion around the factors that contributed to her taking her life; namely the unsupportive educational system and the use of Christian conversion therapy: using psychological, spiritual, or physical interventions to change sexuality (Jennings, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Telfer, Tollit,



& Feldman, 2015). However, the geographic factors surrounding Leelah's life go largely unmentioned. Leelah was from Kings Mills, Ohio; a small town of 1,319 residents that is defined as a highly-rural area by the United States Department of Agriculture (n.d.). Another heavily covered story, the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard also took place in a rural area; however, the politics of rurality were acknowledged to some extent (Loffredo, 2001). Politics such as the degrees of isolation, availability of services, ideologies, and social climate are all key indices of rural attitudes (Slama, 2004). When compared to a Northern area, such as the one in this proposed study, there are resounding similarities.

Educators' teaching styles are inherently tied to the political and social culture of the areas they work in. In the case of Leelah, she felt her teachers were equally as complicit for her bullying as her peers (Alcorn, 2014). This is not to suggest that all teachers living in rural, remote, or northern areas are homophobic and uncaring; however, it does bring to light the complacency of some educators in these situations. Some educators either feel that they lack sufficient knowledge on topics to meaningfully address situations of bullying, or that they did not want to go against the socio-political climate of their communities to do so (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). These two aforementioned reasons combine together to form a vicious cycle for rural educators; one in which teachers feel unsure of how to address topics, then become buried in complacency. The Hanover Research group (2013) suggests that the key best practices that teachers should be employing in their classrooms is:

- being aware of their practices and how they impact on LGBT students,
- access to and implementation of LGBT resources in the classroom, and

- creation of safer and accepting spaces.

Taylor et al. (2016) echoed these findings in their inventory of school board assessments, but added that LGBT specific policies over broad-spectrum inclusion policies are much more effective.

The obvious solution in these situations is to have teachers who are knowledgeable and prepared to address topics of inequity in classrooms. Ontario universities, along with the Ministry of Education, have attempted to face this challenge by increasing the duration of preservice education programs to two years, in order to better prepare teachers for 'real life' situations by giving them more exposure to real classrooms and pedagogy (Rushowny, 2012). Though officially discontinued in 2015, the one-year program model continues to be used for grandfathered applicants. Meanwhile, the two year program commenced in 2016 and ran alongside the former one-year program. However, the two-year program fails to implement more LGBT-specific coursework to its students. Perhaps this is mere negligence by the faculty, but given the current political climate under the Ontario Ford government, chances of this changing in the education faculty seem unlikely. Regardless, this study aims to identify how confident preservice teachers are prepared by the B.Ed. program to address inclusivity in their classrooms. By administering a 'best practices' workshop to a group of education graduates, and subsequently interviewing them, I can then contrast their knowledge learned in the program on LGBT topics to current best practices used in the education field.

### **Personal Positioning**

In order to bridge the connection between a researcher, the study, and the future readers, I would like to situate myself within the research (per Creswell, 2012). Despite having a B.Ed. myself, teaching and the field of education never really appealed to me. Rather, it seemed to be a career that I fell into. Originally, my plan was to graduate from a Bachelor's degree, and head straight into a medical program; however, those plans quickly changed when I started working with LGBT communities and became aware of some of their mental health needs. When I was 21, I began working as a crisis counsellor for the organization Youthline, a non-profit help service specifically for LGBT youth. In that role, I began to see just how common it was for young queer kids to experience horrible school experiences. I cannot count the amount of calls and clients I had that expressed instances of torment and bullying, only to be met by deaf ears from uninterested teachers.

As a queer person of colour, I was unfortunately all too familiar with being bullied and othered. My personal experiences with bullying always resulted in punishment from administration, even though I was a target. For instance, I can recall a time when I was called a 'faggot' and got into a fight for wearing a mesh-type top. Instead of the administration addressing the homophobic bullying and violence from the perpetrator, they chose to suspend me for a dress code violation. These experiences made me reflect on the institutions in place, and how they reproduce oppression. In the aforementioned example, it is easy to see how the cycle repeats. The perpetrator learns that homophobia and violence is accepted if it can be justified, while I learned to play it straight and not trust administration. The teachers involved seemed satisfied to deal

with the 'issue' quickly. I turned down my medical school acceptance and decided to pursue a degree in education, hoping one day to build a classroom that was free from the startling experiences many LGBT youth and I survived through.

Part of my job at Youthline involved travelling across the province training active service teachers on LGBT issues and inclusivity techniques. Many of these teachers were eager to learn about these issues, and remarked that they wished they were more aware of these strategies earlier in their teaching careers. The question, then, that arose for me was, "Why aren't teachers learning about these issues earlier in their careers?"

Teachers' college offered me a different perspective, especially at a Northern institution. Going through the programs and classes, meeting my colleagues who were all future teachers, I began to see how little they are prepared to engage and support sexual and gender minority children in their classrooms. I recall teachers who could not explain the difference between a gay child and a transgender child. There were also teachers who did not understand the issues with telling boys to "man up," just to name a few phrases that perpetuate rigid gender norms. It is not to say that many of these people are inherently prejudiced, but rather, they mirrored dominant values and attitudes about gender and sexual minorities and their knowledge on these topics was extremely superficial. It seemed that these teachers all had a surface level understanding about LGBT communities, which was limited to sexual diversity between the gender binary of male and female. By acknowledging queerness contained within the binary, educators impose their understanding of gender on children, some of whom

are already struggling with sexuality. Interestingly enough, I was taught very little information to suggest otherwise during my time in teachers' college.

Based on my experiences as a counsellor, a trainer, and in my own formative education, my vision then shifted to educating preservice teachers. These teachers in new classrooms can support and aid LGBT children; although most are not given the tools to do so.

Within this introductory chapter, I proposed several topics and factors surrounding the experiences of rural teachers and students in Northern areas. My thesis, however, focuses on three broad topics: the politics of rural identities, their impacts on education and teachers, and the risks facing LGBT youth in schools. In the subsequent chapter, I offer the reader a summary of the scholarship on the aforementioned topics to help contextualize the significance of my research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the first chapter, I introduced three key points: the experiences of LGBT youth in school with inclusion and bullying, the experiences of educators with implementing LGBT-specific practices, and the factors of rurality and remoteness that amplify the victimization of LGBT youth. In this chapter, I turn to the existing literature and scholarship on these topics and ask: How does geographical context influence the experiences of LGBT youth and their educators? This is the question that this review chapter aims to address; more specifically, living in a rural or small population area. I have divided this chapter into a few sections. First, the politics of rurality will be explored, which will then lead into a discussion of rural school climate. Next, the general and rural specific risks of negative school climate will be examined, followed by a brief section on the roles of educators.

In essence, the aim of this review is to frame the rural arena and contextualize the roles of students and educators in education systems, thereby exposing the current deficits in schools. Before beginning, however, I define the terms ‘rural’ and ‘small population’. Using the Statistics Canada definition, any area that is rural has a population of 1,000 people or less, and a designated small population area has 1,000 – 29,999 people (2011). Even so, this definition does not categorize Thunder Bay as rural. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Thunder Bay is a ‘rural cultural’ area (Slama, 2004), as it is surrounded by a vast array of rural terrain and traditionally defined rural communities; this point is also supported by a medical viewpoint, as illustrated by the RIO index (Ontario Ministry of Health, 2017).

In defining the rural context, I first discuss the broad outcomes for LGBT adults in rural communities, before narrowing in on the realities of the education system for youth. Horn, Kosciw, and Russell (2009) suggest that limiting the scope of LGBT youth research to educational outcomes is unintentionally detrimental. In fact, their study contends that without examining the terrain for these youth beyond the classroom, educators cannot sufficiently prepare their students. Instead, special consideration should be given to the broader context in which students interact. In regards to this study, the context of rurality offers purview into how oppression is reproduced in rural communities.

### **LGBT Identities in Rural Contexts**

Over the past several decades, the literature examining the experiences of rural LGBT people has shifted vastly, as rural community members renegotiate their identities in comparison to urbanites (Johnston, 2015). While the majority of existing literature suggests that being queer in a rural community subjects individuals to higher rates of victimization (such as Jones, 2015; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; Palmer et al., 2012), other recent research suggests a contrasting point. Some researchers even go so far as to suggest that there is an urban-bias in previous literature; that rural communities are painted in tones showing them to be harsher than their actual reality (Anderson, Kindle, Dwyer, Nowak, Callaghan, & Arkfeld, 2015; Baker, 2012). This is not to say that urban communities are social havens for LGBT people; queer people in urban areas also experience disparities with their education, socialization, and health care. Wienke and Hill (2013) state that rural areas often lack adequate social and institutional supports for the queer population, thereby increasing the sense of isolation

felt among members of the LGBT. Rural communities also tend to be more socially conservative, as well as more religious, potentially leading to higher rates of intolerance against LGBT people (Little, 2003; O'Connell et al., 2010; Weston, 1995). Rural communities themselves have a different culture from urban areas; which tends to be characterized by social conservatism and isolation from the urbanite elite (Anderson et al., 2015, Baker, 2012; Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008; Kazyak, 2012). Despite a seemingly homophobic overtone in rural areas, straight-identified residents tend to have a greater sense of community and are tolerant of LGBT members provided they fit into specific normative gender presentations (Bell, 2000; Erber, 2015; Kazyak, 2011). Campbell and Bell (2000) elaborate on these presentations in relation to gay men in rural areas by establishing the meaning of masculinity within a rural context. In North America, the concept of "high masculinity" is tied to stereotypes of rural men, such as the Marlboro cowboy. As such, Campbell and Bell contend that deviance from this archetype is more heavily policed on rural gay men (2000). Similarly, the dominance of a hypermasculine rural identity puts pressure on women in these communities to conform to a more traditional subservient role, regardless of their contributions to rural life (Erber, 2015).

**Rural identity versus queer identity.** It would be easy to assume that a greater sense of community leads to increased acceptance of LGBT people; however, the reality is far more complex. The acceptance of LGBT people in rural communities comes at a cost, which is often their queer identity (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008; Kazyak, 2012). According to Kazyak (2011), many LGBT residents who reside in the American rural-midwest describe the climate of their communities as one that



affords both anonymity and visibility simultaneously; while they gain in-group status with their rural identities, their LGBT identity is rarely discussed or acknowledged (p. 14).

While this may be beneficial in so far as avoiding homophobic victimization, it allows for the hegemonic class to proceed uninhibited. As time continues on, and more individuals align themselves with these roles, the standard of queerness becomes tied to traditional masculinity and harder to break.

In this social context, a majority of the representation of LGBT lives are those seen in popular culture, many of which rely heavily on stereotypes. Stereotypes, such as the 'flaming queen' or the 'butch lesbian' can be dangerous, as they form an identity which LGBT individuals are expected to adhere to (Dahl, Scott, & Peace, 2015). It is worth noting that embracing stereotypes can be an empowering experience for some individuals, but when an established framework is too rigid, it becomes too exclusive for many individuals to access. When these individuals stray too far from an expected identity, they are likely subject to 'othering' by their community and isolation (Kosciw et al., 2013a; Saewyc, 2007; Taylor et al., 2011). The concept of 'othering' differs from overt abuse, as it defines the mental shift of viewing minority populations as second class which can, thereby, lead to abuses of various types.

Additionally, the silence of rural LGBT individuals further isolates them from other members of the LGBT community, possibly leading to increased mental health disparities, as compared to heterosexual individuals (CMHA, 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Many LGBT people are not the only ones who feel that gender nonconforming identities and rural identities do not blend; many rural heterosexual people do as well. Sexual and gender minorities are viewed as being a characteristic of

urban life, and almost as the anti-thesis of rural culture (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008). LGBT identities need to be openly discussed, and supported within communities to avoid the aforementioned outcome, and starting at an early age.

**The rural stereotype of LGBT identity.** As it may appear, rural LGBT people tend to face harsher experiences around their sexuality than other LGBT people living in urban centres (Boulden, 2001; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; Oswald & Culton, 2003). Anderson et al. (2015) offer a contradicting opinion, going so far as to say that there is an assumption of rural hostility when discussing LGBT topics by individuals who are not a part of the community. The argument they present is valid, given that most of the literature on the topic is somewhat out-dated and some even makes grandiose statements about the disparity of rural communities without offering any solid evidence. However, the study conducted by Anderson et al. (2015) found that only 18.6% of rural respondents voiced disagreement with same-sex couples, but their methods of recruitment and surveying leave a large opening for respondent bias. This is largely due to the fact that participants for the survey conducted by Anderson et al. (2015) were sourced from the researchers' friends and family.

Overall, then, it is unclear whether their work is actually reflective of a more accepting rural community, or if the researchers have a more tolerant social network. An additional point that should be considered in regards to Anderson et al. is that the majority of their respondents, 71.6%, were female (2015). Interestingly, the female respondents in the study for this thesis were also the most vocal in their support for LGBT rights, compared to the male respondents. In previous studies, rural males were more likely to report higher levels of homophobia (Bell, 2000; Gottschalk & Newton,

2009). Given the limitations in sampling, it is difficult to give the works by Anderson et al. (2015) full credit in dispelling the 'rural homophobia' stereotype. Their work does, however, illustrate the malleability of social acceptance in rural areas surrounding LGBT topics. A final insight into rurality and the rural stereotype comes from Baker (2012), who contends that the rural experience is dependent on place, class, and visibility. These are factors, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**Gay men, race, and rural identity.** The debate on rural acceptance of LGBT people is also confounded by gender identity and race. Annes and Redlin (2012a) found that many rural gay men build and negotiate their social identities by attempting to align themselves as closely as possible the rural heterosexual male ideals. Described as 'effeminophobia', gay rural men in the aforementioned study try consciously to distance themselves from any external signifiers that may be used by strangers to determine their sexuality. Bergling (2001) described the aforementioned phenomenon as 'sissyphobia'; however, the Annes and Redlin definition is used in this work since it primarily focuses on the experiences of rural gay men. By conforming to a straight-cisgender model of identity, the rural gay men in this study found easier acceptance amongst their communities, since they were viewed as being different, but still in touch with rural values (Annes & Redlin, 2012). The concepts of variant sexuality and non-conforming gender identity are ones that are thought to be outside of rural life; rather, these are concepts that are bred in urban areas (Iglesias-Urquizar, 2009; Richardson, 2009).

These findings are similar to those found in Bell's (2000) work, in which rural gay men might try to distance themselves entirely from feminine behaviour to bolster a

hyper-masculine identity. However, a hypermasculine gay identity is not without risk. Portrayals of extremely masculine, rural gay men in media historically has them casted as predatory sodomites, particularly in Hollywood films such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Bell, 2000). Even when considering more contemporary films, though the representation of rural gay men is refined, it still cannot escape the previously mentioned archetypes. For instance, consider the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The main characters, Jack and Ennis, are portrayed to be rural masculine stereotypes. Once alone in a tent together, they end up having sex, which some critics have interpreted as a gay rape scene, where Jack takes advantage of a drunk Ennis (Jackson, 2008). This type of representation can be attributed to a higher degree of sexuality policing in rural areas; where heterosexual men fear being taken advantage of by their seemingly heterosexual friends (Bell, 2000). In specific reference to rural gay men, it seems as though many are forced to tread a narrow path, and negotiate a specific identity. On one hand, they have to negotiate an identity, which is masculine enough to be different than the feminine gay stereotype (Richardson, 2009). On the other, their identities should not be too masculine, as this may signal to heterosexual men that their hypermasculinity is a mask for their sexuality (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Bell, 2000).

**Lesbians and rural identity.** While rural areas have been characterized as incubators for 'traditional' family values and unquestioned gender roles (as noted by Barefoot, Rickard, Smalley, & Warren, 2015; Little, 2003; Little & Panelli, 2007), standards of femininity are not as strictly imposed on lesbians compared to heterosexual women (Valentine, 1997). In fact, some research suggests masculinity,

not femininity, is an indicator of social acceptance for lesbians in rural areas. Kazyak (2012), for instance, found that lesbians tend to integrate better into rural communities based on how well they performed masculinity. She suggests that this may be because rural femininity is usually more accepting of the 'tomboy' archetype of flannel shirts, little makeup, and cowboy boots. This archetype has its limits in rural areas though; rural lesbians are still expected to have long hair and feminine fitting clothing.

Another suggestion may be that some of the underpinnings of rural culture are rooted in traditional masculinity. It seems like the negotiated identity of a majority LGBT people living in rural areas must be one which does not stray too far from traditional established gender roles, while still performing tasks essential to rural culture (Cloke, 2005; Kazyak, 2012; Leedy & Conolly, 2007). Additionally, the policing of sexuality in rural areas differ largely between lesbians and gay men; a rural gay man's sexuality is policed based on his gendered presentations, whereas a rural lesbian's is policed based on their partner selection, and less on their deviation from traditional gender roles (Kazyak, 2012).

Given that queer men in rural areas typically adapt a hypermasculine identity (as documented by Annes & Redlin, 2012a; Bell, 2000), and a great deal of queer women are accepted as 'tomboys', provided their presentation is not too masculine (Kazyak, 2012), it is apparent that there is more significant weight placed on gender conformity rather than sexuality. The emphasis on gender can also be observed in rural schools, where a large majority of educators are reported to use gender discriminatory language and transphobic slurs significantly more than homophobic ones (Palmer et al., 2012). Interestingly, the instance of gender policing from peers in rural areas does not differ

from the rate of policing in urban areas. The strong ties of gender roles to rural identity can explain the notable increase of policing by adults and rural community stakeholders.

**Rural vs. urban identity.** Though there is evidence to support both sides of the rural LGBT acceptance argument, a larger proportion of qualitative research and self-reports of rural LGBT people suggest that there is indeed a problem in their communities; markedly different from urban LGBT populations (Wienke & Hill, 2013). Given their sparse populations, gays and lesbians living in rural areas are more likely to feel isolated, leading to feelings of hopelessness, self-loathing, and despair (Cohn & Leake, 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Williams, Cohen, & Horvath, 2005). As such, many LGBT people living in these areas tend to either migrate to larger urban centers, or remain relatively closeted to avoid social ridicule or even the spectre of it (Weston, 1995). In urban settings, many studies have shown an overall higher acceptance of LGBT people; presumably due to higher education, more liberal ideologies, or more opportunities for socialization (such as Annes & Redlin, 2012a; Howe, 2007; Yue, 2013). The issue of socialization is one that may be important to rural settings specifically.

Consider the *contact hypothesis*, as proposed by Allport (1954). The hypothesis postulates that people are less likely to be prejudiced against minority groups when intergroup contact is increased. In these rural settings where the majority of individuals are more likely to remain closeted, there is little to no intergroup contact between LGBT individuals and community members with dominant social power, who could possibly help create a less hostile social climate. In theory, this creates a situation where the ruling ideology continues on, and reinforces the cycle at hand. Combine this with the

multiple facets of prejudice and identity, it is easy to see how rural areas quickly become inhospitable to many LGBT individuals, specifically LGBT people of color.

The well-being of rural queer people is hard to address with relation to self-reports, as there is a slight contradiction that needs be discussed. Though LGBT people living outside of urban centers often face more difficulty finding acceptance because of their sexuality, adults tend to exhibit higher scores of subjective well-being compared to those living in major cities (Anderson et al., 2015; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Though such a contrast would suggest that rural environments may actually be *beneficial* to LGBT people, it should be noted that measures of subjective well-being do not limit their scope exclusively to sexuality; they include factors such as socialization and health. In other words, the correlates of well-being differ largely between the two geographical contexts. A gay male living in a large urban center may feel more connected to the LGBT community, but he may experience more stress due to factors such as pollution, traffic, crime, or other stressors that are more frequent in large cities (Wienke & Hill, 2013). Wienke and Hill (2013) also cite social comparison as a possible explanation for subjective well-being differences, as urban queer people have a higher personal standard of happiness, health, and satisfaction to which to compare themselves.

When discussing rural identity, race is a factor that also should be considered. Meta-analytic studies of rural scholarship have found that most participants studied identify as white (Palmer et al., 2012; Shelton & Barnes, 2016). When comparing urban and rural identities, race is not often considered; when it can in fact be a keystone in the well-being of LGBT people (Yarbrough, 2004). Given that urban centers tend to be more multicultural, but urban gay hubs are dominated by white cisgender male

representation, queer people of color tend to become a stratified minority (Kumashiro, 2001; Sanchez, 2014). These feelings of exclusion, as well as their higher representation in studies of urban queers, can be one of the contributing factors to lower overall well-being reports of urban LGBT people.

***Rural transgender identity.*** One final consideration on the queer rural voices is their respective gender identities. Trans and gender nonconforming individuals face additional stigma and isolation compared to LGB youth, perhaps because they defy the social gender binary in which sex and gender are immutably linked (Erber, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2013a). There is currently not enough research on trans voices in rural communities to make definitive statements. A study by Horvath, Iantaffi, Swinburne-Romine, and Bockting (2014) suggests that there is no major difference in risk factors between rural and non-rural transgender people, except in regards to measures of somatization. Erber (2015) showed similar results; transgender people may be at a higher risk for mental health issues and substance abuse, regardless of geographic location. The aforementioned studies, and other recent studies concerning the lives of rural transgender people (such as Horvath, Iantaffi, Swinburne-Romine, & Bockting, 2014; Walinsky & Whitcomb, 2010) are not without their limitations. One important key to consider is that these studies fail to account for the degree of ‘outness’ for transgender participants. For example, factors such as the type of transition, stage in transition, passability, and socioeconomic status all can heavily influence transgender people’s social acceptance (Abelson, 2016). Additionally, it should also be noted that the previous two studies do not account for the ‘gay migration’, where individuals leave rural areas to find social acceptance in urban centers (as defined in Annes & Redlin,



2012a; Weston, 1995; Yue, 2013). Regardless of these limitations, it is evident that transgender people still experience severe risks in the rural sphere.

### **Rural School Climate**

Though research on rural queer adults have resulted in mixed studies, the research on experiences of rural LGBT youth shows a clearer pattern.

***Perception of Safety:*** As mentioned earlier, Kosciw et al. (2013a) found in their study that 55.5% of LGBT youth felt unsafe at school on a national level. In a similar study focusing only on LGBT youth from rural schools in America, the percentage of students who feel unsafe in their school rises to 81% (Palmer et al., 2012). Of the reasons that rural students feel unsafe in this study, 71% specifically cite their sexual orientation, and 49% cite their gender expression as reasons they would be discriminated against. Even when compared to a Canadian context (Taylor et al., 2011), the statistics on rural LGBT youth feeling unsafe are significantly higher than their heterosexual peers.

***Educator Responses:*** The responses of educators also vary greatly in rural schools, particularly to instances of homophobic bullying. In the national climate survey by Kosciw et al. (2014), students reported that staff addressed homophobic bullying 45.6% of the time, and of those instances, the majority involved advising the victim to ignore it. Palmer et al. (2012) reported that staff would only address the issue in 13% of the cases reported in rural schools. In fact, they add that intervention was statistically more likely to occur if the remark was racist (54%) or sexist (32%). By maintaining silence about the problem, or addressing the problem as one that victims can simply

ignore, education systems continually enforce that there is no issue with homophobic bullying and prejudice (Grace & Wells, 2015; Savage & Miller, 2012).

Students in rural schools are also less likely to report instances of homophobic bullying to teachers or other education staff (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009). Of all incidents, an estimated 60% go unreported; possibly linked to the students' perception that the incident was not severe, or the doubt that staff would intervene effectively (Palmer et al., 2012). In urban schools, Kosciw et al. (2014) found that 44% of incidents go unreported for similar reasons, although, only 32.5% of students believed that staff deal with such situations ineffectively. These findings are similar to what has been reported by Bellini and Kitchen (2012), who suggest that teachers need better education on dealing with homophobic bullying to properly address it and intervene.

**School Policy:** Rural schools are also sites of stricter discipline for students who identify as LGBT, particularly through the use of school policies. Of the 13,181 school districts in the United States, 29.5% lacked any specific policy protecting LGBT students from discrimination; the majority of these boards being rural (Kull et al., 2015). Rural schools are more likely to have policies in place forbidding same sex relationships (31.8% of schools) (Palmer et al., 2012) compared to urban schools (28.2% of schools) (Kosciw et al., 2014). Further, students reported that staff were more likely to teach and speak in ways that promote negative attitudes towards LGBT people (Palmer et al., 2012). This was done in ways such as using biased language, othering LGBT students, and even teaching anti-LGBT content. These incidences were either unreported to higher educational authorities (for reasons listed in the previous section), or simply

dismissed since no anti-discrimination policy is in place. Even in Canada, where anti-discrimination policies are in place, such as Section 15 in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 10% of students reported hearing teachers using homophobic remarks in schools, and 16.9% of students reported teachers using transphobic remarks (Taylor et al., 2011). These policies, such as equity legislation and mandatory implementation of gay-straight alliances, only help students who self-identify publicly. Though these figures are lower than those reported in the urban and rural American context, they illustrate that anti-discrimination policies are not enough to alleviate the issues of homophobic bullying.

**Language use in schools.** A last point to be mentioned on the educational experiences of LGBT youth living in both urban and rural locales is the language that they hear. Almost 98% of students living in rural communities report hearing homophobic remarks on a daily basis (Palmer et al., 2012) compared to 64.5% of youth living in urban areas (Kosciw et al., 2014). These terms include phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’, as well as words such as ‘faggot’ and ‘dyke’ (Kosciw et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2012). The notable differences of instance between rural and urban schools, 98% to 64.5% respectively, can be suggestive of many things. As previously noted, teachers are less likely to intervene when hearing homophobic bullying in rural schools. This can foster a culture where it is more acceptable to use these remarks freely without fear of prosecution by school officials. Another important point to note is that some rural teachers use such language themselves. For instance, students in the rural study by Palmer et al. (2012) reported that 25% of instances of homophobic language use was from teachers. These numbers jump to 35% when discussing instances of school staff

policing gender expression (Palmer et al., 2012), compared to 26.5% of urban teachers (Kosciw et al., 2014). Interestingly enough, instances of gender policing by peers did not vary significantly between urban and rural schools. Additionally, rural schools are less likely to have anti-discrimination policies offering protection for LGBT youth (Kull et al., 2015). With all these factors combined, it is easy to see how queer voices tend to be stifled in rural communities and schools, while homophobic voices remain.

### **General Risks Facing LGBT Students in Schools**

The aim of the previous section was to illustrate the difference in intensity of negative school climate between urban and rural schools, as experienced by LGBT youth. The following section first explores the general risks associated with negative school climates for LGBT youth, regardless of location.

**Absenteeism and disciplinary issues.** One of the primary responses of students facing negative school climate and bullying is truancy, which often leads to other disciplinary problems (Gastic, 2008; Mallett, 2015; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2015). In both Canadian and North American contexts, two-thirds of LGBT students report skipping school on a regular basis due to their perceptions of hostility and danger in their schools, compared to 8% of heterosexual students in high school (Kosciw et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). Some educators contend that truancy is to be expected in high school, regardless of student sexuality; however, although absenteeism rises in heterosexual students between middle school and high school, it remains consistent for LGBT students (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). As previously mentioned, truancy often leads to other in school disciplinary problems, such as excessive reprimand from school

authorities, and suspension (Gastic, 2008; Mallett, 2015; Poteat et al., 2015). It is worth noting that disciplinary action against LGBT students is not always a justified choice by school officials. In an analysis of school disturbances involving LGBT students, Anagnostopoulus, Buchanan, Periera, and Litchy (2008) found that school staff often punished LGBT students, even if they were the victims in the incident. They explain that this was due to educators 'double casting' LGBT students as a perpetrator in incidents, who are then worthy of punishment (2008). Students may skip class because they feel unsafe, but doing so risks painting them as troublesome to school authorities (Kosciw et al., 2013a; Mallett, 2015; Taylor et al., 2011). When they do attend class, they might be punished, even when being victimized, and in turn become even less attached to their school communities. In this way, the cycle of toxic school climate is repeated. Another interesting point to be made is the effects of absenteeism beyond the education system; students who are frequently truant are more likely to exhibit negative behavior as adults including substance abuse, and property crimes (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Poteat et al., 2015). In short, the combination of truancy and unjust penalization results in many LGBT students missing valuable class time and poor academic achievement.

**Grade point averages.** Academic marks and grade point averages (GPA) are used by schools and other institutions to determine students' aptitudes and scholastic performance. Not only are GPA scores used by higher education institutions to grant admission into programs, they are also used in allocating funding, such as scholarships. The American climate survey found that students who were harassed based on their

sexuality or gender expression reported GPA scores that were 0.5 points lower than their heterosexual peers, 2.8 vs. 3.3, respectively (Kosciw et al., 2013b). Similarly, an Australian study found GPA scores were on average 0.3 points lower for LGBT students (Jones, 2015). While there are many factors that can be used to explain these differences, Aragon and colleagues (2014) suggest that absenteeism, low school engagement, and hostile climate are the key factors leading to lower GPA scores.

Such findings are consistent with other studies examining the link between sexuality and GPA (Kosciw et al., 2013b; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Within the GPA scores of LGBT students, there is a difference on the basis of gender. Compared to queer females, LGBT males tend to have lower academic performance and higher course failure rates, and are less likely to graduate (Pearson et al., 2007; Ueno, Roach, & Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Conversely, LGBT female students reported higher levels of emotional distress, and social integration; a result which may suggest that female students tend to internalize their problems while male students tend to externalize them (Pearson et al., 2007; Ullman, 2015). The types of courses in which LGBT students participate also differ from heterosexual students. LGBT students are less likely to take academic streamed courses, and instead opt for applied or workplace streamed programs (Yau, Rosolen, & Archer, 2015). Both queer males and females are less likely to take courses in math and science, especially past the tenth-grade level (Pearson et al., 2007). In fact, the only classes where LGBT students are overrepresented are foreign languages and the humanities (Kosciw et al., 2013b; Pearson et al., 2007). The overrepresentation of students may suggest that

certain courses are more accepting than others; however, science, math, and other academic streamed courses are requirements for both graduation and admission into postsecondary programs. Overall, low GPA scores and course avoidance may explain the lower degree attrition rate of LGBT students, as well as their disengagement from their school communities.

**Graduation rates.** In Canada, an estimated 68% of LGBT students graduate high school, compared to 79% of heterosexual students (Taylor et al., 2011; Yau et al., 2015). These findings are consistent with studies done in the United States, where approximately 30% of LGBT students drop out of high school versus 12% of heterosexual students (Kosciw et al., 2013b). However, this does not necessarily mean that LGBT youth lack academic aspirations. Despite lower GPA scores and school engagement, 49.7% of queer youth surveyed in America said they had plans of obtaining a graduate degree, and 36.2% planned on completing a bachelor's degree (Kosciw et al., 2013b). In fact, less than 1% of LGBT students reported not wanting a high school diploma, while the remaining students either intend to pursue schooling which does not require a high school education (8.6%) or to return to school at a later date to obtain a high school diploma equivalent (4.6%) (Kosciw et al., 2013b). It should be noted that the preceding data was collected from students in different grades, which is a possible explanation for the gap between earning a high school degree and aspirations of attending university.

### **Risks Specific to Rural LGBT Youth**

Due to the differences of experiences of LGBT youth in rural areas compared to urban settings, certain risk factors related to negative school and social climate are elevated for rural youth.

**Substance use and abuse.** A study of rural LGBT youth from British Columbia showed that substance abuse was more prevalent than students from urban areas; more specifically binge drinking, use of mushrooms, and prescription drug abuse (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Though the specific drugs are not listed, this is similar to the results found by Palmer et al. (2012) in rural American schools, where LGBT youth were found to be more likely to abuse illicit substances. Use of cocaine and other amphetamines was higher amongst urban youth than rural (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). This can be attributed to higher demographic income in urban areas, increased access, or perhaps even the use of these drugs as part of the gay cultural scene in major cities.

**Suicide and self-harm risk.** Poon and Saewyc (2009) found no significant difference between the self-harm risks of urban and rural LGBT youth. Other literature suggests quite the contrary. Rural students more frequently reported instances of self-harm (including cutting, poisoning, and bruising) than other students (Palmer et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2011; Warren, Smalley, & Barefoot, 2016). This extends beyond the North American context. In a comparative study of urban and rural LGBT youth in various Australian locales, Jones (2015) found that rural students were 37% more likely to commit acts of self-harm than urban students. Suicide attempts were also more frequent in rural LGBT youth. In Australia, they were 8% more likely to attempt suicide if they were rural (Jones, 2015), consistent with the findings of Poon and Saewyc (2009)



in British Columbia. However, Poon and Saewyc's findings also showed that rural LGBT boys were specifically more at risk of thoughts of suicide ideation (2009). Their study showed no urban-rural difference in queer females.

**Rural academic outcomes.** While students living in urban settings are more likely to be out to their peers, they tend to experience more victimization than their urban peers who remain in the closet (Kosciw et al., 2014). However, being out is correlated with better feelings of self-worth in these settings, leading to better engagement with academic work and the school community (Kosciw et al., 2014). As the evidence aforementioned would suggest, students living in rural communities are more likely to remain closeted (Jones, 2015; Kull et al., 2015). Interestingly, remaining closeted in rural settings more likely leads to higher rates of victimization in rural schools (Palmer et al., 2012). Regardless of being out or not, students living in rural locales are more likely to report having poorer overall well-being and a lower sense of engagement with the school community (Palmer et al., 2012). As a whole, LGBT youth were more likely to exhibit absenteeism than their heteronormative peers, and less likely to graduate (Taylor et al., 2011). In rural communities specifically, 46% of LGBT students report missing classes or school days, compared to 30% of urban students (Palmer et al., 2012). Absenteeism rose further if students were out or experienced higher levels of victimization. Students in rural communities were also more likely to report insecurity about graduating; related directly to experiencing hostile school environments, and missing too many credits due to absenteeism (Kosciw et al., 2014). Both urban and rural LGBT students report lower grade averages due to higher levels of victimization, with mean drops being about 0.3 points (Kosciw et al., 2014; Palmer et al.,

2012; Jones, 2015). As suggested from the research, there is no significant difference between urban and rural contexts in this regard.

### **Educators' Perceptions of LGBT Youth**

Educators play critical roles in the socialization of children, perhaps even more so in at-risk LGBT youth. Though many studies have suggested that victimization is higher among LGBT youth in schools than their heterosexual peers, supportive and well-informed teachers have been shown to promote more accepting school climates and in turn, lower instances of bullying (Kosciw et al., 2013). However, many educators are fearful of engaging in pro-LGBT initiatives due to their personal lack of information on the topics and their fear of parental complaints ruining their reputations as educators (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). The study conducted by O'Connell and colleagues (2010) echoed these results, in the sense that rural teachers had similar fears in regards to participating in LGBT activism. Their results showed that the majority of the teachers surveyed claimed to feel okay around LGBT youth, but far fewer were actually willing to do anything specifically for these students (O'Connell et al., 2010).

**Current teacher perspective.** In both Canadian and American national climate surveys on LGBT students, it was found that teachers would intervene in half of all instances of homophobic bullying they witnessed (Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). Of these interventions, the majority of them would direct the victim to disregard the attack. In rural schools, the percentage of intervention drops to a staggering 13%, again with most action being directed towards the victim rather than the perpetrator (Palmer et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, teachers were more likely to intervene if bullying was on the basis of race or disability, rather than sexuality (Palmer et al., 2012).

This is not surprising, considering that some rural teachers hold extremely negative views towards LGBT youth. O'Connell et al. (2010) found that rural teachers hold the most negative views towards sexual minority students, even more so than ethnic minority students and students with disabilities (p. 301). Such views manifest in several ways, one of the most prominent being the use of homophobic language to students, as discussed in the previous section. Another way that it shows itself is the manner in which teachers discuss incidents of bullying. In an exploratory study, Anagnostopoulos et al., (2008) found that teachers were highly likely to 'double cast' LGBT victims of bullying a perpetrator, in addition to being the injured party (p. 539). The act of double casting sends the message that LGBT students are partially responsible for being attacked, based on their immutable sexualities. As such, it is no surprise that 81% of rural LGBT students feel unsafe at their schools (Palmer et al., 2012).

Even when educators view themselves as allies, they still tend to act in ways which promote cisgender normative ideals to LGBT students. For instance, Bishop and McClellan's (2016) interviews with rural principals demonstrated that many education administrators felt LGBT students should integrate into their school communities in whatever way possible. One participant in their study suggested that the key to the LGBT students in his school being bullied was based on how, 'in your face' they were about their sexuality; if there was no big show, there was no problem (2016). Another issue that arose with these educators was the enforcement of rules, such as gendered dress codes. In an attempt to treat students equally, normative punishments were imposed by some of the principals for violating school dress codes; however, these

codes established clear boundaries of what is acceptable in terms of masculinity and femininity.

Work by other researchers has shown similar results. Pace (2004) documented the experience of one rural school's educators response to a student's coming out, and found that teachers attributed the student's successful transition to the fact that he was not flamboyant or threatening towards other male students' social standings. The teachers in Pace's (2004) work also did not try to create inclusive school climate, but instead left that task up to other students. Teachers in this study felt that their involvement in creating pro-LGBT climate would not be meaningful because they lacked the appropriate knowledge on the topics. School counsellors felt a similar burden, despite having a degree with more focus on LGBT topics (Robertson & Full, 2015). Rural school counsellors felt that they not only had to be active in building positive school climate, but also in teaching other educators in their schools; however, they lacked the appropriate knowledge to do either (Robertson & Full, 2015). Additionally, some educators felt that their engagement in LGBT advocacy was limited, due to the conservative nature of their towns and schools (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Vega et al., 2012).

**Pre-service teacher perspective.** Much like active service teachers, pre-service teachers were found to be relatively unwilling to discuss LGBT issues in the classroom; they would prefer to discuss issues of race or ability instead (Hirsch, 2007). When probed as to why they avoid these issues, many pre-service teachers cited a lack of knowledge about the concerns facing LGBT students (Hirsch, 2007). A more recent study by Shelton and Barnes (2016) echoed the findings of Hirsch (2007), that teachers

feel uniformed about LGBT topics; however, teachers in the former study did not view race to be a problem in rural areas. According to the teachers interviewed, race issues and racialization are more historic problems; a stark contrast to sexuality issues that they viewed to be more contemporary. Following their logic, Shelton and Barnes believed these educators thought that there is not an intersection of sexuality and racialization. In fact, the educators in their study actively silenced the only queer participant of colour in the group when he attempted to bring up the concepts of intersectionality (2016).

Given that rural areas are not always beacons of racial diversity, it is easy to see how some pre-service teachers may be ignorant towards race issues; though it is vital to adapt an understanding of the intersections of race and sexuality in rural areas (Baker, 2012). A deeper examination of factors which may influence a pre-service teacher's attitudes was conducted by Mudrey and Medina-Adams (2006), where it was discovered that racial minority and female pre-service teachers were more likely to harbour negative views of LGBT youth; albeit the researchers did note that their study did not account for cultural or socioeconomic differences. The definitive constant they found was that lower mean scores of homonegativity were obtained in pre-service teachers with higher levels of education, suggesting the efficacy of professional development on these topics (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Place of origin also influences the way pre-service teachers interact with rural students (Carpenter, 2003; Shelton & Barnes, 2016). Many pre-service teachers who enter the rural education system do so because they attended rural universities, or because they could not find gainful employment in larger cities (Mudzielwana, 2015). Issues arise when urban

teachers enter rural schools with a preconceived notion of rural primitivity (Carpenter, 2003). When pre-service teachers view the rural field as inherently static, they are less likely to engage in actively changing school climate; though there are vast improvements when teachers were adequately trained on LGBT and rural issues (Carpenter, 2003; Hirsch, 2007; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Other studies have shown this very fact, notably and recently by Bellini and Kitchen (2012), who found that pre-service teachers felt more adequately prepared for teaching LGBT students following a professional development seminar.

### **Directions for Educators**

Educators are not incapable in solving issues of academic outcome, despite the fact that they have been complicit in current systems that harm LGBT youth; systems that tend to reinforce heteronormativity and rigid gender roles. They may have been doing so unknowingly, as generic anti-bullying initiatives often take the limelight. Bullying is simply just one head of the hydra; to overcome hurdles facing LGBT youth, educators have to address the heart of the issue: hostile school climates.

**Improving academic outcomes.** Several studies have demonstrated that increasing in-school supports, and reengaging marginalized students in the school community results in higher academic outcomes (such as Aragon et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013; Russell, Muraco, Subrananiam, & Laub, 2009; Toomey et al., 2011). One way that educators can do this is by the implementation of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs. According to McCormick, Schmidt, and Clifton (2014), GSA clubs improve student academic achievement in three key ways: providing LGBT students a

supportive group to be accountable to, improving feelings of school connectedness, and helping LGBT youth reclaim their sense of hope (Aragon et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009).

However, the implementation of a GSA is not enough; marginalized students need to be actively included in it in order for academic improvement to occur (Seelman et al., 2012). If a GSA is available at a school but LGBT youth are not actively involved in it, their mean GPA may drop by 1.2 points below the national average for queer students (Seelman et al., 2012). This may be the result of queer students feeling even more isolated when they are not involved with an organization targeted towards them. The previously mentioned study has also shown that presence of a GSA with active members' results in a 1.3-point increase to student GPA scores (2014). By giving marginalized students agency, they may become more invested in changing school climate, which may result in fewer instances of truancy (Toomey & Russell, 2013). Walls, Kane, and Wiseneski (2010) support the point that GSA involvement and membership improve GPA; however, they also suggest that the implementation of a GSA does little to improve student perceptions of safety and security. They instead contend the implementation of inclusive curricula in addition to GSA clubs to make a positive change in school environments (2010). Additionally, Fine (2015) proposes that queer-specific academic tutoring occurs, so that educators can meet the unique needs of this marginalized population.

**Limitations and challenges.** The primary challenge that arises for educators is for them to overcome personal biases that prevent them from intervening in instances of

bullying and actively challenging hostile climates (Varjas et al., 2007). This is a demonstrable issue in both Canada and the United States, where students reported that teachers would intervene less than a fifth of the time in instances of homophobic harassment (Kosciw et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). The inaction of teachers should not immediately label them as homophobic, as many educators view bullying as normative and unchangeable (Pace, 2004; Varjas et al., 2007).

Another major barrier for educators is their own personal lack of knowledge on how to address LGBT topics without alienating students (Bellini & Kitchen, 2012; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). It is also important to consider that identifying as LGBT is only one part of an identity complex; race, gender, religion, and ability all play a role in identity formation (Baker, 2012). When educators engage in activism and advocacy for queer students, they should be aware of how their actions may privilege some LGBT students, but marginalize others, especially racially minoritized ones (Kumashiro, 2000). Representation of queer people in most contemporary media focuses exclusively on models of whiteness and hegemonic gender ideals, and as such, becomes the normalized image of homosexuality (Bérube, 2001; Dahl et al., 2015). LGBT students need to be viewed as a cohesive, but fluid and dynamic group. When focusing on the normative ideal in LGBT education, other students (most often racialized queer students and transgender students) become increasingly marginalized and viewed as 'the other' (Kumashiro, 2000). Educators need to be cognizant of this issue and advocate for all students, not only the ones who fit into systems of privilege. As Kumashiro (2000) states, when students become 'the other', educators tend to view them as the problem



rather than as victims, perhaps explaining why the victims of LGBT bullying are also reprimanded by school officials (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Gastic, 2008).

A final limitation that educators face in engaging in pro-LGBT work is their personal fear of reprimand (Hirsch, 2007; Palmer et al., 2012; Robertson & Full, 2015). Being public figures, teachers often avoid taking controversial stances on issues, such as challenging heterosexism, due to their perceived beliefs of others (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Vega et al., 2012). In other instances, school administration may have a strong influence on how topics related to sexuality are discussed (Donlevy, Gereluk, Brandon, & Patterson; 2013). Remaining silent in hostile school environments sends the message that educators are complicit with the treatment of LGBT students; however, some teachers feel as if they do not have a choice (Vega et al., 2012). While it is controversial, teachers have a duty to take a stance against oppressive practices in the classroom.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this review, I focused on several key points offered in the scholarship. To begin, rural culture seems to be evolving and adapting (Anderson et al., 2015; Baker, 2012); however, it has only become hospitable for certain individuals who identify as LGBT (Bell, 2000; Erber, 2015; Kazyak, 2011). Members of the LGBT community who encompass a high degree of masculinity, but still retain some rural community values, seem to have the advantage in terms of social acceptance (Annes & Redlin, 2012b; Bell, 2000; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Little, 2003). A large part of this seemingly static ideal can be related to media representation of queerness and rurality, where femininity among men is likened to urban culture (Bell, 2000). Given these adherences to

masculinity, it seems that a facet of rural acceptance is deep-rooted sexism. As such, addressing LGBT issues in rural contexts must explore variant gender presentations and gender ideals as being more normative, and not as an 'urban creation'.

Due to the limited scope of acceptable queerness in rural areas, many young LGBT students experience hostile climate in their formative schooling (Palmer et al., 2012). This hostile climate is more severe for rural students than urban students, which may be related to the increased gender diversity in urban areas (Kosciw et al., 2013a; Taylor et al., 2011). Negative school climate is extremely detrimental to LGBT youth in general, as it can result in: truancy (Mallett, 2015; Poteat et al., 2015), lower grade point averages (Jones, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2013b; Taylor et al., 2011), and lower degree attrition (Kosciw et al., 2013a; Taylor et al., 2011; Yau et al., 2015).

Regarding rural students, negative school climate places them at higher risk for substance abuse (Poon & Saewyc, 2009), self-harm (Warren et al., 2016), and significantly lower academic success (Palmer et al., 2012). The last note this review tried to elucidate was that educators do have the ability to actively change school climate (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2013b; Pearson et al., 2007); however, their own personal lack of knowledge prevents them from engaging with LGBT topics meaningfully (Bellini & Kitchen, 2012; Varjas et al., 2007; Vega et al., 2012). In regards to pre-service teachers, lack of awareness about LGBT topics as well as personal fear of community backlash may prevent these teachers from wanting to fully support LGBT youth (Carpenter, 2003; Hirsch, 2007; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Active service teachers may have similar fears as pre-service teachers, stemming from lack of

knowledge, but their own personal biases may influence their actions as well (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Pace, 2004).

To address hostile school climate in rural schools, educators must lead the way. Large-scale change cannot exclusively cascade from the top down; rather, it also has to start at the roots and build its way up (Taylor et al., 2016). To do this, educators must be confident in their knowledge surrounding LGBT topics; enough to actively engage marginalized students in their classrooms in meaningful ways. This can include gay-straight alliances, curriculum implementation, anti-bullying initiatives, or other strategies. Many studies have suggested that engagement of LGBT students is the key to building positive social climate (see e.g., Kosciw et al., 2013a; Russell et al., 2009; Savage & Schanding, 2013). The main issue that goes unaddressed is the following question: What is the most effective way to build educator confidence in relation to LGBT topics? Bellini and Kitchen (2012) suggest that professional development for teachers is one of the best solutions. Airon and Koecher similarly suggest that more focus needs to be given to teacher education, rather than exclusively on youth outcome research (2019). Bellini and Kitchen (2012) offered an introductory workshop to teachers that showed short-term improvements; however, it is unknown if these types of professional development actually work long term. They also report that students in their trainings feel confident in themselves immediately following an inclusivity seminar, but there was no follow up to determine if their positivity continues when they return to their classrooms. Additionally, they suggest that this type of training be incorporated into the pre-service teacher education curriculum. While many universities have committed to mandates regarding LGBT issues, the research for my thesis attempts to follow Bellini

and Kitchen's work to evaluate if this goal is being met. The aim of my research is to examine perceived barriers that these preservice teachers experience in employing inclusivity practices in their professions. This is achieved through the delivery of a rural-specific LGBT inclusivity training, and to follow-up with participants to determine the efficacy of the training.

### Chapter Three: Research Design

As elucidated in the previous chapter, there is a clear lack of education for teachers on LGBT topics, while there is also a strong need for it in Northern and rural areas. In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education (MoE) has deemed that pre-service education programs should be two years (four semesters) instead of the original one-year (two semester) program. In doing so, the MoE and the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) hoped that teachers would have a better understanding of the theoretical fundamentals of education before entering the classroom, particularly surrounding diversity, mental health, and well-being (MoE, 2013; OCT, n.d.). This, in itself, links back to the main question driving this study: *What are the perceptions of rural preservice teachers on their preparation to teach and support LGBT students in their classrooms, as assessed through retrospective interviews?*

As a social justice educator, as well as an LGBT activist, I have had the privilege of teaching many courses and workshops surrounding equity in the classroom. While I felt the content of my workshops and courses should be mandated for all students, it remained an elective option for students at Lakehead University; it was an even larger surprise when it was not mandated in the two-year program, given the Ministry's direction. At the time this research was completed, Lakehead University was in a transitional period where grandparented candidates of the one-year B.Ed. program were being graduated alongside the first cohort of students from the newly implemented two-year program. The synchronization of graduating cohorts became an opportunity for me

to establish a baseline of LGBT aptitude amongst the graduating one-year group, whilst also measuring the aptitude of the two-year graduates.

Qualitative research seemed to be the best fit for the research I conducted since measuring aptitude on inclusivity is extremely difficult quantitatively; quantitative methods tend to focus more on statistical generalizations and testing a hypothesis (Jackson, 2008). Qualitative research, on the other hand, allows for each participants' experiences, motivations, and opinions to be explored and analyzed throughout the research process. While many exploratory methodologies could be employed to answer my research question, I selected case study methodology due to its heuristic ability and potential for examining the relationship between phenomena and context (Yin, 2014).

### **Methodology and Frameworks**

Educational research and the teaching field as a whole have long favoured the use of case studies. In fact, in my own teaching practice, I have always depended on using fictional scenarios to facilitate and promote my students' learning. When I presented a scenario, the intent was to illustrate a rich portrait for the reader to understand its intricacies so that they could then begin analyzing the potential influencing factors. Case study methodology has a similar aim.

While there are several types of exploratory qualitative research I could have employed in this study, I pursued this particular methodology because of its ability to create rich detail using multiple forms of data collection. Though ethnography would allow a similar outcome, they are often rooted in long term observations; case study allows for shorter-term data collection using a variety of methods (Yin, 2014). The aim

of this chapter is to guide the reader through the research design process using this methodology.

There are decades of scholarship on case study methodology, many of which use their own definitions of what constitutes a proper *case study* (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007). The vast array of definitions is rather unsurprising given that the methodology is used across the fields of education, sociology, psychology, and even medicine (Yin, 2014). However, the incredible variety of definitions and uses appears to lead to some of the criticism that case studies face as a legitimate research methodology.

Within the field of education, Creswell, Stake, and Yin are frequently cited for their discussions about this methodology. Creswell (2013) contends that it is the inquiry of a problem that in turn explains a bound system and the events that influence it. In this definition, Creswell positions researchers to explore cases inspired by an existing query or problem. Similarly, Yin's definition says that this methodology is, "...empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (2014, p. 13). Stake's (2003) approach to case study research was that it was a way of understanding the complexity and circumstance surrounding a single case. Though these three definitions have much in common, they continue to perpetrate the idea that case study is a weak research methodology, since it lacks one consistent definition (Bassey, 1991; Flyvberg, 2011).

Despite the stereotype, case study methodology is still widely employed in several fields (Flyvberg, 2011; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). Yin contends that in order for

case study methodology to be used successfully, researchers must not only address its limitations in their work, but also be rigorous in its implementation (2014).

One of the primary decisions that I had to make before engaging in this methodology was to consider the type of research question I sought to answer; in this study it was, “*What are the perceptions of rural preservice teachers on their preparation to teach and support LGBT students in their classrooms, as assessed through retrospective interviews?*” After reading more of the scholarship on this topic, another question arose: *Why might preservice teachers avoid implementing their knowledge around LGBT topics in new classrooms?* These questions aim to distinguish the grey area between phenomenon and context, which is a central tenet of case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008). While Yin (2014) agrees with the aforementioned point, he also follows that archival history and experimental methodology can answer the same questions. The distinction for case study in this research is that this research focuses on contemporary events; a trait which is unique to case studies (Bassey, 1991; Yin, 2014). It is also important to note that as the researcher, I had little control over the content that was taught to the students during their degree program, or their experiences during placement. Both Yin (2014) and Stake (2003) agree that this is an important facet when employing a case study.

In the above discussion, I clarified the rationale for the methodology. In what follows, I discuss the selection of the *type* of case study. Both Stake and Yin offer different frameworks under which case studies can be considered. Yin’s (2014) definitions of case studies being *exploratory*, *explanatory*, or *descriptive* offered a starting point for me; however, these categories were not discrete enough for me to



disseminate my research into. While I would largely align my research with Yin's *exploratory* typology, which has no clear single set of outcomes, I also intend for it to document and explain the phenomena, akin to the explanatory and descriptive typologies (2003). Instead, I chose to largely operate under Stake's framework, which divides case studies into the categories of *intrinsic* and *instrumental* (2003). While *intrinsic* studies aim to only provide further understanding of the case, *instrumental* studies go beyond that to develop deeper insight into the case and shifting focus to the phenomena (Stake, 2003). The intent of my research is to gain greater understanding of the following phenomenon: rural teachers' hesitation to support LGBT students. Chronicling preservice teachers' provides insight on how avoidant behaviours begin.

To further refine the methodology of this study, I had to also consider the number of cases that I would incorporate into the study. Studies that employ the use of several individual cases are often viewed as more 'sound' than those that follow a single case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This does not mean that single-case studies are inferior, but it does mean that single-case studies must be more robust in their application to be viewed as 'sound' (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). The preferred method of creating vigour in single-case studies is through the use of *embedding* (Yin, 2014). In an embedded single-case, major subunits of the case become directions for analysis. I originally had intended for this study to be a single-embedded case, in which the one-year and two-year cohorts became the basis of analysis. Upon completing participant selection, discussed further in this chapter, I chose to proceed with a single-case study design. The major reason for this change was the limited participant pool for the one-

year cohort: the sample would not have provided an accurate sample to conduct a meaningful comparison.

A single-case study is also referred to as a “holistic” case study. The holistic case study sometimes provokes a reader’s scepticisms, but when done well, promotes a similar level of understanding as a multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). Holistic single cases are best used in situations that are unique or rare (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). Baškarada (2014) suggests that the holistic case study is useful for revelatory cases, where observation may have previously been difficult. As this study follows rural-identified preservice teachers, as well as the first cohort graduated from a newly implemented program, I believe that this case represents both unique and revelatory circumstances. Additionally, previous literature has not followed rural teachers in the same area as this study.

**Defining the case.** Before discussing the theoretical framework and limitations in the methodology, it is beneficial to first frame the ‘case’ in this research. The term ‘case’ in this context not only refers to the primary unit of analysis, but also the scope of the study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). Without establishing boundaries of the case, analysis and external influence is endless; the resultant study cannot possibly cover ever issue relevant to the study (Yin, 2014). This study explores the capabilities of preservice teachers, but it is insufficient to simply use this to define the case since it is such a vast and temporal population. For this reason, proponents of the case study method all recommend that ‘cases’ be well bound to create rigour (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014).

There are several ways in which cases could be bound. The first, as suggested by Stake, is establishing boundaries based on the period of *time* and *activity* that occurred (2003). Creswell's parameters of binding also utilized *time*, but differed by adding *place* as a boundary factor (2013). Miles and Huberman contended a different framework of organization, suggesting that cases should be primarily bound by the *definition* and *context* that the phenomenon being study occurred (2013). All these parameters are equally valid for binding, yet they all are fairly grey. In an attempt to consolidate and simplify the ways in which cases could be bound, Thomas suggests that binding should occur with respect to the *subjects* of the case study, and the *object* of the study (2011).

I utilized Thomas' (2011) framework to begin framing my case. The *subjects* of this particular case are preservice teachers from Lakehead University who, at the time of data collection, were soon to be graduating from the B.Ed. program. The *object* of this study is the education surrounding LGBT equity the *subjects* received in their degree program. This initial binding proposed by Thomas then allows for subsequent boundaries to be addressed. The *subjects* of this study all have rural identities, and intend on pursuing their careers in Northern Ontario. The *subjects* also all experienced another common phenomenon of participating in a workshop on LGBT equity. Within these bounds, this study examines rural preservice teachers' abilities on best practices for LGBT students by giving them sufficient background on the topics, and subsequently having them evaluate their prior knowledge received during their degrees. The overall purpose is to explore the level of comfort that these teachers have in engaging with these topics during their professions.

**Theoretical and analytic framework.** When conducting single-case research, Stake (2003) and Yin (2014) suggest that researchers strengthen their studies through applying theory to both the research process and analysis, thereby building external validity. External validity is of particular importance to single-case designs, as it helps the researcher produce applications of the case to a broader population. Stake directs that ‘issues’ within the bound case are inherently wired to social, historic, and political contexts; without acknowledging these contexts, a proper case study cannot occur (2003).

Since this research serves to address typical sources of systemic inequity for rural LGBT youth, namely teacher education, I have chosen to conduct the study under a critical theory paradigm. Critical theory contends that culture is riddled with instances of privilege and oppression; research should be focused on creating change in existing social structures (Browne, 2014). In this case, the system in question is the education faculty at Lakehead University, and how it may produce teachers who interact with LGBT students in ways that could be harmful. This study will also incorporate analysis from the school of relativism, as the reality of the research subjects is largely dependent on their socio-cultural interpretations and construction (Guba, 1990). By “school of relativism”, I refer to the notion that there is no true moral ‘truth’, rather there is several interpretations of it based on an individual’s frame of reference (Guba, 1990).

The primary interpretive framework that I utilized in this study is transformative and critical theory. One of the dominant guiding features of transformative frameworks is that they aim to change oppressive practice through dialectic modes (Creswell, 2013). Fay (1987) suggests that critical theory and its application should be used to explore

social institutions; specifically, their historical problems. Given that this case study examines how prepared rural preservice teachers are, critical theory lends itself to this study. In training participants in this study, I attempt to provide a starting point for transformation within the education faculty. This is what Morrow and Brown (1994) propose as the benefit of critical theory: the will to comprehend the social phenomena occurring, and to use praxis to bring transformation.

Though there is a seemingly large media presence of queer identities, the “queer” identity is largely linked to hegemonic cisgender ideals, in which men and women perform to societal expectations of their gender (Sánchez, Greenberg, Liu, & Vilain, 2009). Preservice teachers may buy in to these ideas of ‘acceptable queerness’, and in turn, impose these standards on to students. For example, studies have found that some educators may advise queer students to be ‘less flamboyant’ and more conforming to gender ideals in order to avoid aggression from their peers (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Pace, 2004; Palmer et al., 2012). By employing critical theory and queer theory in this study, I construct a high level of external validity throughout the research and analysis, thereby strengthening the holistic single-case (Yin, 2014).

### **Limitations of Case Study Methodology**

In the previous sections, I have offered some of the limitations of case study methodology, as well as the steps I employed to strengthen it. The primary consideration for successful case study implementation is making sure the type of case is well defined and all of its components are explained (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). This particular case is an instrumental, holistic design. Next, the boundaries of the case need to be well set to construct a high level of rigor within the study. As mentioned above, this

case was bound using Thomas' (2011) method of establishing the *subject* and the *object* of the case. Yin (2014) and Stake (2003) also contend that cases should employ the use of theory throughout the process and analysis phases, which was described above. The final way that the case study methodology can be made more rigorous is by acknowledging its criticisms, the most frequent of which is that case studies are not generalizable (Gerring, 2007; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). In this sense, I note that the aim of this study is not to produce *scientific* generalizations, but rather to produce *analytic* generalizations, in which findings are examined under theoretical lenses in order to be replicated in similar cases (Yin, 2014). This research follows a well-bound case, and in no way serves to be a universal account of all rural preservice teachers' experiences. Rather, the results of this study are situated amongst the existing scholarship on the topic to provide lessons that are unique to this case but that might have wider application. Additionally, the procedures and process undertaken in this study are clearly defined in the subsequent sections, so that they may be repeated in future studies, creating a degree of reliability within this study (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014).

In closing, I face the second major criticism within holistic single-case studies: their tendency to lean towards researcher validation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). When a researcher is situated close to the case, they are more likely to interpret data in ways that conform to their biases. I offer the reader two measures I have used to avoid this tendency. The first is that I have attempted to be transparent about my personal positioning among the study. The second is that I have employed multiple forms of data collection, in an attempt to triangulate the findings of the study. These methods are discussed in the next section.

## **Methods and Data Collection**

The first mode of data collection occurred when the subjects attended a training workshop designed in part by me in collaboration with two LGBT non-profit organizations located in Toronto, and the experiences of several LGBT youth. The workshop began by exploring the gender and sexuality spectrum, then contextualized the impact of queer identities in classrooms and education systems. Participants were then engaged in several co-operative and individual activities to better understand the multiple facets of bullying, othering, and school climate for LGBT students. Throughout the workshop, best practices for LGBT students were employed in activities to demonstrate to participants how they could implement them in their classrooms. I have offered and taught this workshop across the province, and in the past offered it at Lakehead University as a non-credit course (See Appendix C for workshop outline). Similar workshops have been offered and used in other studies (such as Bellini & Kitchen, 2012), where they have shown that many educators lack foundational knowledge needed for LGBT topics. During this workshop, the participants engaged in several activities, which illustrated their prior knowledge and aptitude of LGBT-inclusive teaching strategies. These activities were also recorded (using worksheets and chart paper), and were later subjected to comparative analysis. These recorded activities were conducted before appropriate LGBT instructional techniques were taught, in order to gain insight on participants' knowledge from their degree programs. This data set was collected primarily to offer baseline in analysis and data triangulation.

A secondary data set was also collected during the workshop and the focus group that followed, which were a set of observational notes chronicling common

phrases and behaviours of the participants. If a phrase or behaviour was noted four or more times during the participants' time with me, I noted it down in my observations. These notes became particularly useful in coding the interview data, as they provided a framework for analysis.

After the workshop, I organized small group interviews with the participants. The focus of these group interviews was to analyse what the participants thought of the content of the workshop, and to contrast the contents against what they have been taught in their formal education at Lakehead University. Group interviews were selected over individual interviews for several reasons. The first is that group-style interviews encourage responses from participants through 'chaining' and ideas flowing together (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). When the participant pool is from a similar background, they tend to speak more candidly and freely, allowing the researcher to get richer data (Creswell, 2013). Along these lines, group interviews also limited the potential of respondent bias during data collection; the participants outnumber the researcher, so there is less pressure to conform their answer to the researcher's expectations (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012). This step in the study represents the intended evaluative aspect of it, which lends itself to group style interviews. This style of data collection became popular amongst researchers and advertisers alike, since it was an efficient tool for evaluative feedback (Fern, 2001). The interview strategy used in this study is semi-structured, where the researcher asks the participants a few open-ended questions. Below is a sample of the types of questions that were asked to participants (see Appendix D for full question list):



- What are some things you learned about LGBT youth in your time completing a B.Ed. degree?
- Do you feel you were adequately taught about LGBT children and issues in your degree?
- What was a new idea or strategy you learned in the workshop?
- How do the ideas presented in the workshop contrast to your experiences in your education degree?

It was run using the nominal group technique, as pioneered by Delbecq and Van de Ven (1971). The steps of this process are summarized below:

1. A question is presented by the researcher.
2. Participants write down their ideas.
3. Participants then share their ideas with the room, while the researcher writes these ideas down on a large sheet of paper.
4. Participants then rank and vote on the ideas presented, putting them into a hierarchy of approval/agreement.

Utilization of the nominal method addresses a common problem of focus groups, namely, the potential of having an overactive participant. Instead of a single person dominating the entire interview, this method allowed multiple viewpoints to be shared, including those from passive interview participants. This method is not without its own ails; some participants may feel that the interview process is too rigid. In order to work around this potential barrier, the interview question list contained several open-ended questions that do not follow the nominal structure, but instead promote open discussion

and rapport among the group. Questions for the interview were largely comparative for the participants, in which they contrast the LGBT curriculum with that of the B.Ed. program. Additional questions, including those surrounding specific practices, were developed after the primary analysis that occurred during the workshop itself. For example, students in the workshop seemed to disconnect with ideas of non-gendered instructional practices. In turn, I asked the participants to recount their previous experiences with non-gendered practices in the interview.

Due to scheduling issues, which will be explained in further detail in the subsequent sections, two interview sessions occurred. Each session lasted approximately sixty minutes, and were both digitally recorded. Following both interviews, I manually transcribed the recordings and sent copies of the transcription to the participants to be reviewed. In doing so, the participants had a chance to clarify any miswording and also confirmed that the transcription was accurate. Establishing reliability of the transcription in this way was essential, as it helps the participants' voices remain true and reduces the interference from myself as the researcher (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). None of the participants in this study chose to revise statements that they made in the transcription.

**Participants and location selection.** This research focused on preservice teachers knowledge of the unique needs LGBT youth in northern and remote areas, and as such, it was fitting that the location and participants are representative of these areas. Lakehead University was selected not only for its proximity and convenience for me, but also because a large proportion of its students have Northern backgrounds. Additionally, since it is situated in Thunder Bay, which is a population hub among

several rural Northern Ontario communities, it attracts students from nearby northern and remote areas. Another consideration is that many of the teachers in the Thunder Bay region are graduates of Lakehead University's B.Ed. program, suggesting that students from the program will be representative of the future northern teaching community.

Participants were selected from the graduating cohort of the B.Ed. program, with some exceptions. The participant pool was limited to pre-service teachers who (a) have resided in Northern Ontario for a minimum of five years; and (b) who intend to obtain employment in the teaching field in Northern Ontario. Within this pool, 35 subjects were invited to participate in this study. The selection process itself attempted to eliminate sources of researcher bias, in this case, the tendency for me to seek participants that would confirm my own assumptions. Additionally, the selection process was an attempt to capture some of the diversity of the Northern Ontario community. These participants were invited to attend a 3-hour workshop called, *LGBT Youth in the Classroom*, which covers equity practices for LGBT students in classrooms (refer to Appendix A for a copy of the information letter potential participants received). The workshop was the first stage of data collection. As a token of gratitude for participating in the study, each participant received a certificate of completion for their time in the workshop; an approximate value of \$45 CAD.

For both cohorts of Lakehead University's B.Ed. graduating class of 2017, only 35 students fit the desired participant selection guidelines for this study. All 35 teachers were invited to participate; however, only ten expressed interest. Within this pool, one participant was asked not to participate, due to her personal relationship with the

researcher. Each participant that expressed interest in the study were send a copy of a consent form to review that detailed the events of the workshop, as well as the methods of data collection (see Appendix B). Participants were also informed that this consent form would be signed at the beginning of the workshop session. The first workshop was organized for the other nine participants, although only three attended. The participants who did not attend contacted me after the workshop to express their regrets, citing personal last-minute emergencies. The workshop proceeded, as did the group interview, while a second date was set for participants who could not make it was established. On the second workshop date, three more participants attended, and the remaining three did not respond to further communication from the researcher.

While the active participant group for this project represent roughly 17% of the potential participant group, their input on this topic weighs more heavily than their peers. First, of the active participants, three were graduates from the newly implemented 2-year degree program, which contributed a total of 6 individuals to the total participant pool. As such, these three subjects account for 50% of their cohort. Additionally, the content of the workshops should be considered in relation to how the vast majority of teachers interact with these topics (See Chapter 2 – *Literature Review*). Participants who expressed interest in this project are, presumably, educators who wanted to learn more about this specific population of students, and how to improve their educational outcomes. As such, they represent the ideal population to investigate the efficacy of this workshop, since they are more likely than their peers to notice instances of LGBT topics discussed in their degree programs. Additionally the participants presumably had a desire to learn more about these topics, where as their peers may have felt sufficiently

prepared by the faculty. In that case, the data would still be useful in a comparative analysis of their personal knowledge, and the education they received in their degrees. Given the information presented above, it is my belief that the active participants in this group represent approximately 67% (6/9) of the potential participant pool; a sufficient percentage to offer validity on the results of this study.

The active participant pool, henceforth referred to simply as 'participants', was comprised of five females, and one male; all of whom identified as white. As previously mentioned, three of the participants were graduates from the 2-year degree program, while the other three were graduates of the 1-year concurrent degree program. All of the participants were under the age of 25 at the time of the interview, and three of them had secured paid teaching opportunities in Northern Ontario. Two participants were native residents of Thunder Bay, while the others had moved to Thunder Bay more than five years prior from surrounding communities in Northern Ontario, all with rurality indices lower than 10. All participants expressed an interest in continuing their residence in Northern Ontario. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the culture and nuance surrounding gender and sexual equity in northern and rural areas is markedly different than those found in bigger urban areas. Having participants who are not only familiar with the rural area, but intend to continue their careers in those areas ensures the content in the workshops and study are germane. A final note on participant dynamics deals with their sexuality. Of the group, only one female identified herself as questioning, while the rest of the group identified as heterosexual; however, all participants were involved in a heterosexual relationship at the time of the workshop.

## **Data Analysis**

Being that this case study utilized multiple forms of data collection, I employed a variety of tools for data analysis, including: primary textual analysis, interview coding, and verbal patterning. Stake (2004) defines four distinct phases of data analysis that should be employed in single case studies:

1. Raw data review;
2. Search for trends or patterns;
3. Explore linkages between outcomes and potential patterns; and
4. Draw conclusions and sort them according to issues.

With Stake's recommendations in mind, I similarly conducted my data analysis. The data sets that were examined in this study included: activity notes from the workshop, instructor notes from the workshop, and focus group interview data. The first sets of data that were analyzed were the activities from the workshop. One of the activities from the workshop involved the participants drawing a picture of a family at the beach. From this activity, I examined what participants interpret terms such as family, and family structure to mean. For instance, participants all drew a standard nuclear family, consisting of a two opposite cisgender parents and their two children, and as such it could be inferred that this is what participants view as normative. Analysis of these activities did not directly influence the end result of this study per se, but they were used in contrast with existing scholarship to situate rural educators amongst their colleagues. This level of analysis is consistent with Yin's recommendations for strengthening single case studies, in order to promote sound analytic generalizations (2003).

During the workshop itself, I recorded observational notes on how well the participants engage with certain topics. When a phrase, theme, or behaviour occurred four or more times in the workshop session, I made note of it. Much like the activity data, the observational notes from the workshop were used to situate the attitudes of rural preservice teachers in this study amongst other research on educators. Take, for instance, the participants' frequent avoidance of LGBT topics involving interaction with principals or superintendents, which occurred in this study. By noting this during the workshop itself, I can then parallel the participants experience to teachers in other researched cases.

A secondary use of this data was to note topics that should be explored further in the interview process. As mentioned previously, the interview was designed as semi-structured, allowing for probative questions to be added while the interview was occurring. For example, there were several interactive activities during the workshop, which aim to model equitable teaching practices. When participants seemed to be unaware or hesitant to engage in certain activities, I made note of it and used it to form probative questions for the group interview sessions. The final use of this data was to discern common themes that could be used when coding the recorded interview transcript. According to Dewalt and Dewalt (2002), qualitative observational data is best used to understand phenomena through building theory, or testing hypotheses. With regards to the workshop data that will be collected, these notes will help build a case for the final evaluative aspect of the study.

The primary data for the study came from the group interview process itself. From the interviews, there were two sets of data: the ranked data gathered using the

nominal method (as described above), and the actual recorded interview. Data collected using the aforementioned method was used in two ways. The first was as a meta-evaluative piece to critique the participants' perceived efficacy of the two-year B.Ed. program in teaching them best practices for LGBT youth. Similar to the observational notes I recorded, the data collected from the nominal method was also used to create themes for use in the coding process. The participants' perceived ranked value of workshop topics and experiences was coupled with the field note patterns in order to refine these codes. Starting with a common phrase or participant behaviour, also known as an *in vivo* code, can expedite the coding process. From both these processes, common themes of avoidance fear of reprimand, and confidence emerged.

The recorded interviews were transcribed after the conclusion of each workshop, and subsequently sent to the participants to be reviewed for accuracy. Upon their return, I loaded the transcripts into the coding program ATLAS.ti and began examining the data looking for repeated instances of the themes generated from my first two data sets mentioned above. This method of coding, *a priori* coding, examines data based on predetermined metrics; however, *a priori* coding can open the door to researcher bias (Blair, 2015). Since the themes in this case were generated partially based on my interpretations of the participants' behaviours, one could imply that those codes are subject to confirmation bias (Blair, 2015; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). As a result, I chose to reconduct the coding process, instead employing the grounded-inductive method. This coding strategy first examines the data set for common language patterns, which I have chosen to call themes, and then organizes these themes into a code family (Charmaz, 2006). Utilizing two coding methods resulted in a plethora of



themes to be organized, but it also enabled me to have a deep understanding of participants' viewpoints.

By using multiple methods of data collection and sources, the overall strength of the case study is improved (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014). Participant data can be corroborated in multiple ways, thereby improving the purity of their experiences while also minimizing my interference as a researcher. In the subsequent chapter, results of the data collection and analysis are presented in two ways. First, the data from the workshop activities, observational notes, and nominal collection are organized and presented as code families. The second section of the results chapter discusses the results of the group interviews, organized in grounded-theme code families.

## Chapter Four: Results

The workshop processes created six total data sets: two sets of personal observational notes, two sets of workshop activities completed by the participants, and two recorded and transcribed interviews with the workshop groups.

### Observational Notes and Workshop Activities

While instructing the workshop, I made note of behaviours and comments that could potentially indicate levels of discomfort or disinterest from participants. These levels ranged from mild avoidant behaviours from participants, such as avoiding interaction, to more overt displays of discomfort, namely verbal comments, which I detail below. Each workshop session produced three handwritten pages of notes that I later analyzed to gain insight into the thoughts of the participants while learning new topics related to LGBT youth.

During the workshops, participants also completed several activities collaboratively and shared their learning on sheets of chart paper. These sheets were collected once the activities were over so that I could analysis could be conducted. The main analysis from these sheets was to examine participants' knowledge of certain topics before and after best learning practices were taught to them in the workshop.

Upon reviewing my observational notes from both workshop sessions, as well as the completed workshop activities, I discerned three major themes: fear of reprimand, avoidance, and lack of confidence.

**Fear of reprimand.** All of the participants during both workshops expressed some sort of unease and fear when learning new tactics and strategies specifically for LGBT children, ranging from administrative censure to parent reproval. Of the six

participants, five of them expressed an anxiety about how their immediate administrators, specifically principals or vice-principals, would receive these tactics. Questions such as, “What if my principal tells me I can’t do this?”, or “Can my vice-principal have me fired for this?” came up, and promoted active discussion amongst the participants who expressed that they too had similar trepidations. The other comments that arose in this same vein were similar to those mentioned above, and focused on “...staying on the administration’s good side”. This anxiety is similar to what O’Connell and their colleagues found in their examination of teacher attitudes, specifically that fear of reprimand establishes conformity to oppressive practices (2010). While there were comments throughout the workshop that align with the aforementioned study, they came to a peak during a case analysis activity, in which the participants address a hypothetical conflict involving principals. The exemplar in this activity involved a student in the participants’ classroom who was usually dressed in clothing considered to be appropriate for men, and was being sent home by the administration for their choice to wear a dress to school. In this scenario, the best course of action is to affirm the student’s identity and choices, as punishing them only serves to reinforce the notion that they are somehow ‘wrong’ (Aragon et al., 2014; McCormick et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009). Even after the aforementioned best practice was taught to the participants, they still expressed a degree of discontent. Their fear, echoed by many teachers in other studies, is that refusal to comply indicates a penchant for rebellion or disobedience. As one participant suggested in the first workshop session, “...Who wants to work with the teacher who’s difficult? It’s better to play nice with them [administrators]”. She continued on to recount a lesson shared to her by her faculty advisor before her first teaching

placement, the essence of which was that conformity was essential. She recalled being told that, “The minute you make too many waves, word will spread. There’s a reason why you see teachers with jobs within a year, and others who supply for a decade”. In the second workshop, one participant mentioned being told something similar, which she labelled as being ‘blackballed’, or gaining a reputation that would prevent her from being hired in the future. It appears that fear of reprimand is not exclusive to these teachers when they have their own classrooms, but rather it has been taught to them throughout their degree programs.

The fear of administration was also evident in the collaborative activities that the participants completed together, most notably when making suggestions for building classroom inclusivity compared to building school-wide inclusive climate. Both activities involved the participants plotting their ideas on chart paper, and then subsequently sharing their findings with me. Interestingly, both groups had substantially more suggestions for things they could do within their classrooms than things they could build inclusive climate school-wide. When questioned about the difference, one teacher noted, “I don’t know how much I can do in the whole school...isn’t that a job for the principals? I don’t want to overstep”. When teachers employ inclusive practices with this mindset, it creates a large pattern of inconsistency for students in their classrooms, which may in fact amplify the disparities they experience going through the school system; inclusivity practice works best when it is employed at both the classroom and administrative levels (Taylor et al., 2016).

Backlash from administrators was not the only worry of participants in this study; four of the six indicated concerns about parents becoming agitated and complaintive if

they actively used inclusive tactics in their classrooms. One participant asked the following question during a discussion of trans students:

What if a parent of one of my students expresses discomfort with their child being in the same room as a trans student? In that situation, whose side should I take? If I appease the parent, then I'm part of the problem in our schools, but if I argue, then I have an angry parent.

When these questions were posed, the other participants began nodding and asking me what I believed the best course of action to take would be. I encouraged them to discuss the situation with their fellow participants before I would give input. When they were asked to share their decision, one participant spoke on behalf of the group and said, "If the parent is in your face, a white lie doesn't necessarily hurt the other student", while the other participants nodded in agreement. When prompted further, this same participant suggested that telling the parent their child would not interact with the trans student might placate them. I attempted to provide reasons why the rights of students outweigh the opinion of parents, as well as how the suggested 'white lie' indirectly implied that the parents' viewpoint was correct: by accepting the parent's complaint and seemingly taking action, the complaint is in turn seen as valid. After this comment, participants began to avert their gaze and became silent. One participant from the first workshop aptly noted, referring to me, that, "...you know so much more about this stuff. I'm afraid I'd say something wrong or piss off the parent." When this comment was made, I chose to steer the discussion in the direction of background knowledge and asked the students what types of things they would need to know before they could confidently make a decision. The remark previously mentioned ties into the third major

theme to be discussed further on in this chapter, lack of confidence, but also illustrates the fear that many new teachers hold in engaging with equity practices for LGBT students.

Less prevalent in the workshop was a fear of hurting or oppressing LGBT students. While two participants noted that they might misspeak or that their practices might be hurtful, the others expressed discontent with the perceived difficulty involved in some of the techniques discussed. For example, the concept of gender-neutral classroom organization came up. One suggestion in this topic was that teachers could use gender-neutral pronouns, such as 'they' in place of 'he' or 'she', on student worksheets or in word problems. A participant explained that having to incorporate multiple pronouns into students' work was a large imposition on an already busy schedule. This point created an argument between two of the participants, because one believed that the extra work was worth it to avoid alienating children in their classroom. While this topic did not come up organically in the second workshop, I chose to introduce it as a hypothetical discussion point with the group, simply stating, "Some educators find these modifications take too much time." After saying this, I noticed some participants nod their heads, so I continued on to ask if anyone felt similar. I was quite surprised when two participants in the second group agreed that the workload was an inconvenience. The sentiment of inconvenience is important to note here, as it becomes more relevant in subsequent chapters.

Overall, the fear of reprimand from school authority figures was most prominent, followed by a fear of reprimand from community members, namely parents. The fear of oppressing students was least common over the workshop discussions, so much so

that some participants indicated a willingness to knowingly engage in an oppressive practice in the name of convenience. The limits of the participants' compliance in best practices seem to extend only to what they can quickly change; anything beyond such point becomes seen as a nuisance.

**Avoidance.** Topic or subject avoidance was a common occurrence in the instructional portion of the workshops; demonstrated in both verbal and non-verbal means. All participants in the workshops exhibited some form of behavioural-avoidance, most prominently avoiding eye contact. It was a dramatic switch from the tone of the workshops initially, where the participants maintained strong eye contact and rapport with me. However, when certain controversial topics arose, non-verbal gestures and cues indicated discomfort, perhaps even anxiety. For example, when the idea of LGBT-inclusive curriculum was discussed, many participants went silent and instead directed their focus to their phones or papers in front of them. Such avoidant behaviour also occurred during case studies that discussed student gender-transitions, although in the aforementioned instance it was coupled with fidgeting and tapping. While these actions could perhaps be explained as nervous habits, I noted that their onset was in relation to the topics being discussed; namely those surrounding trans students, which was a major cause of fear amongst participants. In the previous section, this fear was heavily illustrated in regards to a case study. Such avoidant behaviours were a marked departure from the participants' behaviours during other sections of the workshop, where they consistently contributed their opinions on the topics and maintained strong eye contact. My opinion based on years of experience with facilitating the workshop

lead me to believe that these behaviours are linked to the attitudes of the participants concerning the workshop topics.

The completed assessment activities also involved a demonstration of topic avoidance. Two participants made verbal attempts to change the focus of separate activities that represented unfamiliar territory for them. The attempts to change focus were not marked by aggressive outbursts; rather the participants employed tangenting and humour to shift focus. The first attempt by a participant to change topics occurred when the group was discussing the creation of safe spaces. She quickly changed the focus away from the topic of safe spaces by discussing the importance of regular physical exercise, and then subsequently started listing ways teachers could incorporate fitness activities into their daily teaching. Other participants in the group attempted to ask questions about how her ideas were linked specifically with the needs of sexual and gender minority children; however, she did not make an attempt to address the questions from the group. Instead, she continued to discuss ways to incorporate physical activity in the classroom until another participant took over the discussion to share their ideas.

In the second instance of topic avoidance, the participant used humour as a strategy when she became disengaged with the topics. A prime example of this occurred during the discussion of a gender non-conforming student. She stated to the group that she would follow the lead of the administration rather than support the student in question. When I brought up the feelings of the student in this scenario, she began making jokes about why she would send the student home, such as, "Well if he looks better than me in a dress, I don't think I'd want him in the classroom anyway". Her



humour not only resonated with the group, it also seemingly deflected attention from her and redirected the line of questioning back to the group as a whole.

Behavioural avoidance aside, there were a number of instances where participants made verbal objections to the topics being discussed, using phrases such as: “Can we move on”, “I’d rather not discuss...”, and, “I don’t want to talk about...”. These objections often followed the aforementioned behavioural indicators, and were especially noticeable during discussions of trans issues in schools and classrooms. In one case, a participant became uncomfortable with the idea of gender neutrality in her classroom, as she believed gender to be exclusively linked to sex. When she shared this opinion with the group, other participants began to critique her opinion and explain why they believed it to be wrong. She then loudly asked me, “Can we move on with the workshop? This is taking up a lot of time”. This anecdote illustrates the partiality for uniformity that many new teachers experience, in which they engage in practices with the least perceived resistance (O’Connell et al., 2014; Schneider & Dimito, 2008).

A similar instance occurred with another participant in the second workshop who did not see the value of having their students understand the diversity of gender in the classroom. When the topic arose in the workshop, the participant expressed that, “...Kids have other things to think about. Why should we confuse them by telling them that there are different genders?” The objection that followed this statement was far more aggressive and direct than other the objections of other participants, where she was loudly berated for being close minded about the needs of LGBT children. With a raised voice and visibly furrowed brows, the participant announced that he would, “sit outside if we [the workshop group] didn’t change the subject.” It was interesting to note

that this participant was completely compassionate and supportive when discussing topics associated with sexual diversity and youth, but had strong beliefs surrounding gender. With all forms of avoidance in mind, it should be clarified that the behaviours discussed appear to be the products of other feelings and emotions that the participants may have during the workshop.

**Lack of confidence.** A final common phenomenon demonstrated in both workshop groups was an overall lack of confidence not about the content of the workshop, but about application of the content in their schools. The primary indicator came from the language used by the participant group when they spoke about implementation of inclusivity strategies. When they shared ideas, the language used suggested a level of indecisiveness. For example, when I asked the participants to share their knowledge of LGBT youth near the beginning of the workshop, their responses were all direct and confident statements about their knowledge; each statement often started with “I know that...” or “I have read...” In the first workshop, one teacher proudly announced, “I know the meaning of the acronym ‘LGBT’ and the history of the Stonewall riots”. When statements such as this one were made, I made sure to note the dynamics of the participant while they were speaking. In discussing their prior knowledge, participants frequently maintained strong eye contact and consistent vocal tone. However, when I probed the candidates on how they could address instances of bullying in the classroom, the participants spoke tentatively; statements such as, “I might...” or “Maybe I can...” were commonplace. I also made several notations regarding participants’ vocal tone as an index of their apprehensiveness. Whenever suggestions to address bullying were shared with the group, the majority of participants

ended their sentences with an upward inflection, similar to how questions are asked. In doing so, the participants seemed to seek validation from me, rather than relying on their own content knowledge and judgement. When a participant was asked to share an example of a visible sign that they could incorporate into their classroom to indicate a safe space, she said, “I could possibly hang a pride flag?” instead of a direct declarative response.

Statements, such as the one previously mentioned, were typically followed with a question directed to me or the other participants seeking reassurance and validation. For example, the aforementioned participant ended her responses frequently by asking, “Does that make sense?” Similarly, in the second workshop cohort, another participant changed tone completely during talks of bullying, transitioning from eloquent sentencing to brief statements that consistently ended with a caveat about her knowledge. Consider her idea for building inclusivity in a classroom, in which she said, “I might get books that show diverse families for my classroom? But that’s probably wrong, I don’t know.” For this particular participant, this was an extreme departure from other comments that she had made throughout the workshop.

These were just some of the many examples of precarious statements that were heavily present in the beginning of the workshop; however, by the end of both workshop sessions, markers of hesitation were not evident at all. Participants began using more confident ‘I will’ statements to express their ideas surrounding implementation without including ambiguous language. Instead of saying, “Maybe I might use gender neutral language in my work”, one participant ended the workshop saying, “I can use diverse examples of gender in my classroom.” Additionally, rather than ending statements with

inquisitive inflection, participants increasingly moderated their tone to indicate a level of conviction and self-confidence within their speech. The almost anodyne insecurity that they spoke with was replaced by steady tones and consistent engagement, similar to how they spoke at the beginning of the workshop. While they still asked questions to seek assurance, the manner in which these questions were posed was far more assertive. An indication of this can be observed from the previously mentioned participant who consistently sought reassurance from the group when speaking. The comments she made early in the workshop often ended with, “Do you know what I mean?” while scanning the faces of her peers for some sort of endorsement. Her demeanour after the workshop was markedly different, namely in the fact that she no longer ended comments with the aforementioned questions, nor did she seem to scan the room for approval before continuing.

### **Interview Data**

Following each of the workshops, participants engaged in a group interview to reflect on their learning and to contrast it with the education they received in their degree programs. I recorded and transcribed each of the two group interviews. Subsequent to transcribing the interviews, each transcript was coded to search for common themes among the members of each group interview, and as such, providing a basis for deeper analysis.

This study employed the use of grounded coding, in which themes were derived from the participants’ responses to interview questions and discussions. Unlike the *a priori* method, in which analysis is guided by predetermined themes and frameworks, grounded coding allows for the participant voice to come to the forefront of the analysis.

Initially, each transcript was analyzed using ATLAS.ti for *in vivo* codes: a thematic grouping of ideas using the participants' exact phrasing. While this first process identified several common language patterns, it also elucidated a larger thematic comparison at play. As a result, I repeated the coding process, this time utilizing value coding to refine the contrast that participants felt in their roles as future educators and as new graduates. These roles formed the overarching code families that are used to group the emergent themes from the primary coding: educatory identity and learner perspectives.

**Educator identity.** The code family entitled 'Educator Identity' focused largely on how the participants viewed themselves in an authoritative position in their school communities. The family itself is comprised on the common themes of teacher insecurity, Northern-rural identity, and educator confidence. The first primary theme in this family was 'teacher insecurity', which detailed the participants' hesitation for engaging in LGBT advocacy in their classrooms. The most cited reason from the participants for their insecurity in participation in advocacy was their own lack of professional knowledge. For example, one participant stated the following in an interview when asked about her prior knowledge of LGBT topics: "I have gay friends and family, but that doesn't really mean much compared to a student in my classroom. I teach grade 2, the issues are completely different". Similar sentiments were shared by participants, who also had personal backgrounds with LGBT topics, but did not feel as if their experiences had professional applications. The one male participant explained this experience as follows:

One of my best friends is gay. I go with him to Pride sometimes, he's taken me to bars, and I like to think that I am inclusive. The problem is I don't know what that does for my students. They might feel comfortable with me, but how am I going to make my classroom a better place for LGBT kids?

A participant from the two-year cohort explained that the content discussed in the workshop was all new information to her, despite being a recent graduate. In her explanation, she detailed that while she knew the meaning behind LGBT, her degree had led her to believe that, "approaches to all students are the same." Within that same workshop session, another participant felt similarly that there was little discussion of LGBT topics and practical application. She said that discussions of LGBT students were focused on slurs, and recalled feeling, "very awkward"; so much so that she, "did not want to say anything". The primary issue here is one that is common among educators regardless of experience, in that centralized approaches to student issues will always have the same results (Anagnostopolus et al., 2008).

When education faculties produce teachers that are only aware of LGBT students in terms of potential victimization, it creates a narrative suggesting that these are the only issues that need to be addressed. The scope of existence becomes so limited that it is hardly surprising that these teachers become almost indifferent to the complexities of LGBT youth in their classrooms; the issues are too novel for early service teachers to examine. Another facet of teacher insecurity that was commonly mentioned was related to the participants' status as new teachers in their schools with little power. In explaining some of her previous experiences with inclusive content, one participant noted, "...At the end of the day, we're just going to have to teach whatever

books they [the school] tell us to.” This sentiment was shared by another participant from the same cohort who felt that talking about certain LGBT issues was not acceptable since no one else in her educational community did as well. When discussing her educational community, she noted that, “We [new teachers] are just told to be inclusive and to avoid doing certain things without any explanation or implementation.” In agreeance with the previous statement, another participant offered their recollection of the last time LGBT students were mentioned by the school administration, simply as, “a twenty minute conversation, with nothing too in-depth that would actually help.” When asked why they have not requested more information, one participant retorted that, “It’s hard to ask when everyone else seems like they get it.”; however, research has shown that the majority of educators do not get ‘it’ (Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). The herd-like mentality that seems to blossom here easily illustrates how quickly cyclical oppression from educators perpetrates and continues. While trying to establish an identity as an educator, new teachers quickly feel stifled by the shadow of senior colleagues determining how they should act. The further down the gyre new teachers travel, the harder it seems for them to create change in their environments.

Although a more infrequent code, many participants mentioned how their Northern-Rural backgrounds shaped their educator identity. When I asked them to examine why they believed LGBT issues are not more discussed in Northern Ontario, one participant brought up the ‘Northern mentality’:

We have kind of like a Northern mentality. I think and I feel like we are a little bit segregated from like bigger places, and bigger cities, where inclusivity and diversity is more prominent. So we do have a lot of ignorant people here.

Though many studies suggest that the culture and politics of Northern rurality is changing from being socially conservative to liberal, the criterion for inclusion is still inherently tied to Western hegemony (Anderson et al., 2015; Bell, 2000). A major factor for the cultural shift in Northern and rural areas is said to be an influx of representation and outside immigration. The problem with this in rural areas, especially so for Thunder Bay, is that mainstream representation is limited to acceptable queerness and whiteness (Erney & Weber, 2018). This is not to say that larger urban areas champion sexual and gender diversity; rather, they are similarly culpable in upholding the ideals of whiteness and maleness. What is evident is that the staggering lack of diversity and condemnation of discrimination leaves rural areas slowly advancing. The idea of the North being culturally dissimilar from urban areas resonated with other participants in the second interview group, one of which added the following: "You go to even smaller communities all dotting around Thunder Bay, like Red Rock and Schreiber. Those are even, I'll say, they're even worse because they're even more isolated and hick [sic]." The participant who made the aforementioned comment previously resided in Hurkett, ON, a small community close to the township of Red Rock, and thus had first-hand experience with the isolation and culture of those specific rural areas. One participant referred to isolation and lack of diversity to explain her hesitation to engage with the topics being discussed. She described feeling, "...So naïve to some of the issues we [the workshop group] talked about. I hadn't met a gay person till university." Her feelings



of naiveté prompted her to recommend that the workshop content be, "...introduced to smaller communities" because, "racism and homophobia are learned things."

Despite harbouring feelings of insecurity due to their backgrounds and lack of knowledge, the participants in this workshop all indicated that they felt a drastic increase in their capabilities after its completion. Teacher confidence, the final code to be discussed in educator identity, was frequently mentioned in the interview as a by-product of the participants' new knowledge. The confidence discussed by the participants was rooted in a deeper understanding of the background knowledge, as well as a framework for implementation. As one participant noted in the post-workshop interview, simply, "...Having the information behind it helps me feel more comfortable with it [the workshop topics]." Similarly, a participant who had an understanding of LGBT topics before explained that, "having the background knowledge to help students" as a result of the workshop made her feel more confident in the classroom. In fact, the confidence that the participants described extended beyond the classroom, and into their personal lives. As one of the two-year graduates explained, the workshop made her, "...feel a lot more comfortable and knowledgeable. I feel like I can discuss this stuff with colleagues, even with friends and family." The major factor behind the participants' confidence seems to be their understanding of implementation of the workshop material. When asked about their comfort level in carrying the workshop teachings into their classrooms, one participant remarked, "This workshop helped me in terms of teaching specifically and how to incorporate strategies to benefit kids." Within the same cohort, another participant felt that she, "...learned things we could actually apply, and how to apply them. The B.Ed. didn't do that." Other participants agreed with the

following statement provided by their colleague in the interview: “I feel like I can now visualize more processes that I can take into the classroom”. Overall, all participants seemed to have a more positive outlook on teaching LGBT youth in the classroom as a result of their new knowledge.

**Learner perspective.** The second code family, *Learner perspective*, focused on how participants contrasted the material learned in the workshop to that of their education degrees. Between both the two-year and the one-year participants, there was no difference in how they viewed the knowledge of the education faculty. A major perception shared between both groups was a faculty-wide lack of understanding when it came to topics related to sexual and gender minority youth. In the first interview, a participant noted that she felt that the faculty “really didn’t go over anything” in terms of LGBT students. Other participants recalled hearing about topics vaguely, but described the content delivery as “rushed”, “glazed over”, and “extremely surface level”. At best, a participant described their understanding of the faculty’s teachings as, “being inclusive of everybody. That’s it.” Another participant built on the experience of the aforementioned person and said that he felt, “The focus is on like autism...rather than issues of race or sexuality.” The focus in this regard can potentially explain why new teachers are more willing to discuss matters of student exceptionality rather than address issues surrounding sexuality and gender (Hirsch, 2007; Palmer et al., 2012; Shelton & Barnes, 2016). A participant from the two-year cohort hypothesized that the staff were apprehensive about such topics, and that the faculty should “make staff more comfortable to talk about it...maybe have workshops for the staff.” Another agreed with

this feeling, adding that she felt the few instances of LGBT-specific knowledge, “Were very lecture-y. You come in, sit there, and listen; no time for questions.”

Many participants also noted that they felt the faculty itself primarily focused on bullying, and the eventuality of LGBT youth being victims. As a participant from the two-year group noted:

The one instance that LGBTQ issues were discussed was into the bully talk. We had to use slurs, but we didn’t want to say anything. We felt so awkward. Even then, there wasn’t much beyond that.

Participants from the one-year group shared similar experiences, notably that, “There wasn’t a lot of guidance in terms of how to include them [LGBT youth] beyond that [bullying].” Even when LGBT students were discussed in conversations of bullying, many remarked that the coverage was still meek:

[The faculty] discussed bullying in general rather than anything with the LGBTQ community specifically. There were anti-bullying strategies discussed, but not directly targeted towards LGBT students. We talked about bullying with those [LGBT] kids, but no resources or guidance.

One participant candidly remarked during the interview that she felt as though she “learned more in the 3 hours than I did in the 5 years with my B.Ed.” Similarly, some participants shared that they felt that the knowledge in the workshop was “completely different than what we learned in our B.Ed.” One participant disagreed with that statement, noting that she felt as if she, “Didn’t learn enough [in her degree program] to say, ‘Oh, this contradicts’.” When I asked the workshop group to elucidate further on this topic, a participant suggested that it was “because our faculty doesn’t have enough

information, so they're not talking about it." In essence, participants seemed to think that the knowledge the faculty did have was limited to bullying; even then, it was extremely limited.

A final perception shared by the participants, which is the last theme of this code family, was a sense of *faculty indifference* towards LGBT students in classrooms. In addition to feeling like the content delivery was basically skimmed or seemingly "surface level", some participants reported feeling as if the faculty as a whole did not care about these issues. A participant in the second workshop shared that she felt the attitude of a lot of the faculty was, "Okay, we mentioned it, let's move on." One of her colleagues agreed with that statement and added that she felt the faculty "doesn't really go in depth into how to incorporate inclusivity and how to implement it." This feeling was commonly mentioned by participants in both interviews, who felt the indifference from the faculty became reflected in their teachings. A participant from the two-year group, for instance, shared that the faculty does not "have inclusivity, themselves, in our own classes." She continued on to suggest that the faculty, "Should be practicing what they preach to use as teachers." In the opposite group, a participant shared a similar view of the faculty, in which she felt the faculty taught her to "have inclusivity and diversity," in classrooms; however, "They [faculty] never actually have that in their classrooms." In this regard, it is easy to see how the cycle of oppression in classrooms continues: educational experts (in this case, the faculty) place no emphasis on LGBT youth, thereby creating new educators who do the same.

**Directions for improvement.** The final code family discerned from the interview procedures were suggestions for continued improvement of the B.Ed. program. As

alluded to in the previous sections, all participants felt that professional development was the primary source of improvement in their understanding. Many suggested that this training should be “a mandatory part of the curriculum they’re teaching for the B.Ed. program,” since the knowledge was markedly different from what the participants had previously learned. Several participants also saw the value in this type of training for faculty instructors (see previous section) and experienced teachers as well. One participant suggested that experienced teachers “are comfortable in the system,” and may be repeating hurtful teaching practices unknowingly. The need for continued development was also suggested by a participant, who felt that, “This [the workshop] shouldn’t just be a one-time thing; I feel that it’s ongoing.” Another echoed this feeling, adding that the topics of sexuality and gender are “changing, so it’s good to keep up with all those changes.” This sentiment encapsulates what Taylor et al. found in their 2016 evaluation of school level interventions to build equity; professional development across all levels of school employees is necessary to produce meaningful change.

Participants who attended the one-year cohort of the B.Ed. program had noted that the volume of material in the workshop was not practical for their schedules. In remembering her time in the program, one teacher stated, “This material is essential, absolutely. But I feel like I need to practice it and see it being used. I don’t think we had time for that before placement.” Another one-year participant added, “I barely had enough sleep most nights in the program. I don’t think I could have managed an extra class during my professional year schedule.” With the implementation of the two-year program, time constraints are not as much of an issue, as suggested by the participants in that program. Most admitted that their schedules felt “padded” in the two year

program, where many of their courses had significant repetition, and that material similar to the workshop could be integrated with little strain. While it seems that the Ministry of Education's initiative of extending the program is conducive to promoting more equity practice, participants in these workshops felt that it is not being done. The consensus between both cohorts is that the implementation of inclusive education strategies should be occurring throughout the program and mandatory courses, if not completed as a stand-alone course. As a one-year participant noted, "Even seeing these strategies being used in my subject area would have been better than what I was taught about gay kids."

The interview process included a nominal ranking question regarding the students' suggestions for the B.Ed. program and faculty improvement. Nominal ranking questions involve the participants first answering the question privately with the facilitator, who in turn shares the suggestions with the group to be ranked in order of importance to the collective group (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1971). Both workshop cohorts ranked 'improving faculty members' knowledge' as the biggest direction for improvement, followed by 'dedicated content time' in the first cohort, and 'more practical application time' in the second.

## **Results, Abridged**

When developing this research, I aimed to investigate the following question: *What are the perceptions of rural preservice teachers on their preparation to teach and support LGBT students in their classrooms, as assessed through retrospective interviews?* During my exploration, a subsequent category of themes emerged that I

chose to explore: *Are there barriers to preservice teachers' implementation of inclusivity strategies?* While I had originally presumed that the essential findings of this research would be exclusively linked to building content knowledge; however, it is apparent that content is only a piece of the puzzle.

This is not to say content knowledge was unnecessary. In fact, all participants expressed that they felt their understanding of LGBT content was very limited. The resultant effect of their limited understanding was seen in their performance during workshop activities. Upon being taught a purview of LGBT content and best practices, participants across both groupings expressed a higher level of comfort in discussing the topics. Content knowledge for participants, rather the lack thereof, presented two barriers that these teachers face in implementation of inclusive practices: lack of confidence and avoidance.

While low confidence and avoidant behaviours are often correlated, I believe their distinction is worth notation in this study. Participants' low confidence presented itself as mainly a barrier to implementation, as they were worried about their application of what they knew being incorrect or outdated. While the workshop improved their immediate content knowledge and resultant confidence, the fear of information being outdated or becoming dated still lingered for participants, especially in more Northern and remote areas where social change is perceived as slow. As such, participants in this study collectively felt that frequent and consistent professional development was needed throughout their careers, but particularly at the beginning. As one participant noted:

I can't imagine being a teacher 5 years down the road having to learn this.

Starting off with a strong footing is better than thinking that you've been doing everything 'right' only to discover you've been limping the whole time.

Confidence appeared to be an essential facet in the implementation of best practices; an important contrast to the theme of avoidance. In terms of avoidance, participants tended to try to distract from topics that involved them confronting their own understandings of the foundations of LGBT issues, most notably those of gender and sexuality. The process of unlearning historic schemas of gender, such as the binary male-female system, resulted in some participants trying to change the topic, or becoming completely disengaged from the workshop. Frequent avoidance also occurred when participants were asked to explore the implied link of biological sex to gender identity, but interestingly, topics of sexuality were met with far less avoidant behaviours. When topics of cisgender, individuals who continue to identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, gays or lesbians were discussed, most participants remained engaged and inquisitive. With avoidance being more frequent on topics of gender than sexuality, it appears that gender is a highly powerful socialization agent for the participants.

In both workshop sessions, all attendants also expressed a fear of reprimand from both school administrators and education stakeholders. As preservice teachers entering the career field, the subjects in this research indicated that being well liked by the immediate administrators in schools, namely principals and vice-principals, is highly important. By appeasing education stakeholders, such as parents and community members, the study participants believe that they are more likely to be accepted in the



school community. Challenging current practices in the school that are oppressive to LGBT youth is perceived as a risk by preservice teachers, and may prevent them from obtaining employment or becoming an integral part of their school communities. Additionally, participants placed heavier emphasis on communal acceptance when discussing more Northern-rural locales with smaller populations.

During the interview phase, the participants highlighted three key aspects of their identities as recent graduates that impact their readiness for engaging with LGBT youth throughout their careers: their identities as teachers, their identities as learners, and their potential for creating social change.

As educators, participants noted that they not only required a background understanding of LGBT topics and inclusion practices, but they also required on-going validation that accounts for their Northern-rural backgrounds. While simply having an understanding of current best practices encouraged participants to speak about LGBT topics more fluidly, they noted that feeling support from administration and education stakeholders is important for their practice. Further, many participants cited their Northern-rural upbringing as a potential barrier moving forward, as the material taught contradicts their perceived notions of rural culture. Interestingly, the participants did not seem to question why rural-culture was seen as anti-queer, but were more preoccupied with maintaining their statuses as community members.

Being recent graduates, the preservice teachers' identities as learners were a contributing factor to their preparedness for engaging with LGBT youth. As learners, participants divulged that they did not previously see the need for inclusive practice, since it was rarely mentioned. In retrospect, participants hypothesized that seeing

practical applications of these types of strategies would have been beneficial, as the majority of their tutelage in the faculty portrayed LGBT youth as solely victims of bullying. Some participants even expounded on the aforementioned ideas and suggested that perhaps the faculty members they learned from did not feel comfortable with the topics.

Upon completion of the workshop, participants expressed that they felt able to promote change within their classrooms, and some felt they were on the road to promote cultural disruption of oppressive practices in their communities. To extend this feeling to other teachers in similar positions in the future, the workshop participants suggested that faculty members incorporate inclusive practices in their lectures, and model them for preservice teachers. Additionally, many participants continued on to implore faculty and active service teachers to engage in professional development, in order to further the promotion of inclusive schools.

In the next chapter, I discuss the results presented above in relation to the current scholarship on Northern-rural identity, queerness, and student achievement. By situating this research amongst the current political zeitgeist in Ontario, I offer recommendations for improvements to B.Ed. programming, school policy, and also discuss the study's limitations.

## Chapter Five: Integration of Results and Future Directions

Before commencing on the discussion and interpretation of the study results, it is germane to note that the aim of case study research is to highlight analytic generalizations from analysis of the data (Yin, 2014). In essence, this research was not conducted with the intent to produce a framework that could be specifically applied to other research contexts. The intent of this research was, and is, to build a theoretical premise and to reflect upon the viewpoints given to me by the participants.

The essential point of this research was to assess *the perceptions of rural preservice teachers of Lakehead University on their preparedness to support LGBT youth in their classrooms*. The participants in this study did not feel well versed or prepared for the task at hand. While simply educating the participants about best practices made them feel confident about supporting LGBT youth in the future, it is evident that there are multiple factors that need to be addressed within this case.

The primary factor that needs to be discussed in relation to this case revolves around the feelings of pre-service teachers when they employ LGBT inclusive strategies in their classrooms. Overall, participants in this study were similar to other preservice teachers in regards to addressing LGBT issues. Throughout the workshop and interview process, the participants frequently stated that their personal lack of knowledge on LGBT issues as a reason for not discussing issues in their classrooms, similar to the findings of preservice teachers in studies by Hirsch (2007) as well as Shelton and Barnes (2016). While the aforementioned studies, as well as others by Pace (2004) and Bishop and McClellan (2016), indicate that the lack of support is evidence that

preservice teachers do not want to unintentionally offend a student, the participants in this study did not demonstrate that as a major concern. Instead, the participants frequently mentioned concerns of administrative backlash or negative feedback from parents as reasons barring their support of LGBT youth. This distinction is suggestive that community identity plays a larger role in rural preservice teachers than those in urban areas. While rural residents often place their integration in their communities as essential (Anderson et al., 2015), former research on rural preservice teachers has not found the same pattern. With this in mind, it is not simply enough to provide additional content on LGBT inclusivity in the B.Ed. program, but instead that the content needs to be presented to active-service teachers as well to have noticeable effect in schools. Active service teachers in rural areas also cite their ignorance towards LGBT issues as a barrier (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Pace, 2004). By beginning teaching this content at an earlier stage in a teacher's career, the hope is that inclusivity becomes standardized in rural schools, so that new teachers do not hesitate in supporting marginalized students. Northern and rural schools mostly employ rural residents, who most likely attended a remote university as well; other employees typically are from urban areas but could not gain employment (Mudzielwana, 2015). Though urban residents may be more willing to promote inclusive content in their rural schools, they often fail to do so because of their preconceived notions of 'rural primitivity': a belief that rural residents are not capable of cultural change (Carpenter, 2003). In this regard, Lakehead University is in a position where the inclusion of LGBT content may have lasting effects for rural teachers and students. Based on the preliminary results from this study, preservice teachers who are

confident in supporting LGBT students, other rural and remote institutions may also experience similar outcomes with content inclusion.

The second factor to be discussed is the type of content that is delivered to pre-service teachers. In Bellini and Kitchen's (2012) study, they found that workshops on LGBT inclusivity, similar to the one utilized in this study, promoted greater confidence amongst preservice teachers in supporting LGBT youth. However, the workshops offered by Bellini and Kitchen focused heavily on bullying. Their approach is not unwarranted because teachers throughout North America frequently struggle to intervene with homophobic bullying, even more so in rural areas (as seen in Kosciw et al., 2013, Taylor et al., 2011; Varjas et al., 2007). The complexity of rural LGBT students extends beyond bullying, and into a larger picture of school and holistic community integration. With this in mind, the content of the workshops offered, or the content included into Lakehead's B.Ed. curriculum, needs to extend beyond bullying to address the outcomes of LGBT students outside of the classroom. Focusing the scope of inclusive education to bullying is not enough to foster positive school climate for LGBT students.

In particular, educators in rural school systems tend to believe that queer children should look and act like the representation that they have seen in the media: white, gender-conforming, and 'straight-passing' (Bérubé, 2001). The workshop participants were not exempt from this trend; when discussing their prior knowledge of queer individuals, they frequently referenced celebrities in their examples that fit the aforementioned archetype. Being products of rural education themselves, it is unsurprising that the participants used these examples. Studies on rural teachers have

found that they do not see the importance of the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender (Shelton & Barnes, 2016). The workshop used in this study had participants first explore the composition of their identity (in regards to race, gender, and sexuality) before other activities occurred. In doing so, the participants were able to gain a greater understanding of a marginalized identity in relation to their own (Kumashiro, 2000). In the B.Ed. program, a similar approach should be made for future teachers so they can appreciate how race confounds a queer identity.

The final factor that needs consideration is normalizing inclusivity in education faculties. During the workshops sessions, it became evident that all the participants had similar levels of comfort when discussing different queer identities. In discussions of gay men, participants readily engaged in discussion and challenged each other's ideas. When topics involving lesbians arose, the conversation cooled, but was still productive. However, the topic of trans students and gender non-conforming students was noticeably marked by avoidant behaviours and silence from both workshop groups. Based on these actions, as well as the retrospective interview with the participants, it is clear that the understanding of gender for these teachers is a major factor in how they interact with LGBT content and topics. It is evident that discussions and representations of sexuality are commonplace, meanwhile discussions of gender fluidity and identity rarely occur. One explanation for this behaviour can be gathered from how rural communities police gender, particularly those of queer individuals. The combination of hypermasculinity and a masculinized femininity in rural communities suggests less care by residents of sexuality, but a heavier emphasis on gender conformity. With reference to the LGBT content in the B.Ed. curriculum at Lakehead, it is apparent that a heavier

focus on the fluidity of gender should be applied. Previous curriculum changes in Ontario by the Wynne government made gender identity a topic of discussion for students, although it seems the participants did not have a chance to learn instruction practices surrounding gender before it was repealed by the Ford government. While changes within the B.Ed. program may have been in the works, recent government changes have repealed topics of gender identity in schools (Collaco, 2018). Regardless, the need for gender identity in both the health curriculum, and the B.Ed. program is evident.

While the suggestion of adding queer content that focuses gender, self-reflection, and holistic outcomes of queer youth to the B.Ed. program seems innocuous, it is not without its own risks. Considering the existing climate in Northern-rural areas, and the experiences of participants in this workshop, there is bound to be criticism and resistance from community members and faculty alike. The focus primarily should be with faculty members and working educators in the community. Previous research has demonstrated that existing educators become more comfortable and less resistant to queer-inclusivity when they are provided adequate training on the topics (as seen in Carpenter, 2003; Hirsch, 2007; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Even in climate surveys, well-trained teachers promoting inclusive spaces leads to an overall reduction in harm risks associated with LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). Essentially, change needs to first occur in the education spheres in the face of community backlash, in hopes of a brighter future.

### **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

As previously mentioned, the aim of case study research is not to make statistical generalizations, but instead to offer analytic observations and recommend changes to the BEd curriculum to educate pre-service teachers about LGBT issues in schools. With specific reference to this study, a single-case design was conducted due to the uniqueness and rarity of the case. The results and findings of this research should be further contrasted against cases that engage similar methods to refine its validity.

In binding the case for this study, several variables of the participants were purposely excluded to target the level of analysis. Some of the excluded variables include religion, previous education, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics. Baker (2012) postulates that these factors, in addition to gender and sexuality, are all important facets in defining a composite identity. Applying the lens of queer theory shifted my focus predominantly to those of gender and sexuality, and how this particular social institution reinforces maleness and heteronormativity, the idea that heterosexuality is the 'normal' or 'preferred' orientation. More specifically, queer theory was employed in this study to examine the boundaries of gender and sexuality in rural areas to disseminate specific interventions to be used in future workshops to be held in rural areas. Though queer theory is criticized for hiding white privilege (Perez, 2005), I elected to include discussions of whiteness in this work, as the workshop participants were all white in contrast with me, a queer person of colour. Additionally, given the changing demographic of Thunder Bay, I felt it useful to discuss the characteristics of whiteness in light of racial diversity. Even so, religion and socioeconomic background are two factors, which could impact the findings of this study.



A final consideration of this study is of the participant pool itself. Though a small group, the recruitment process and participant selection imposed a large limitation on the findings of this study. Participants of this study all elected to take the workshop because of their personal interest in the topics, and as such, it is unknown if their peers were better or worse prepared for engaging with LGBT students than they were.

Though the participants indicated that they felt the content differed largely from their formal education through the faculty, it is a possibility that this is not accurate; however, the findings of this research are in line with research conducted in other rural areas.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Thunder Bay and Lakehead**

Though the participants in this study seemed to leave the workshop more confident and ready to create social change, they represent only a small fraction of the teachers and educators in Northern Ontario. When teaching this workshop professionally and outside of the research context, I seldom questioned the multitude of factors that teachers experience as a barrier to actually implement the practices I taught. It was very black and white to me: teachers care about children, more children today freely identify as queer, therefore teachers have to care about queer children; if they did not, they were contributing to the hardships experienced by queer youth across the province. Though teachers have a federal and provincial obligation to protect LGBT youth, they also have to navigate a politically-laden school to find meaningful employment and connection to their colleagues. Rural teachers appear to need this even more so, as they have a larger emphasis placed on community integration.

In Ontario, the former government made significant headway for LGBT youth, through their redesign of the health and physical education curriculum. In the redesign,

topics central to queer identity, including sexual and gender variability, was to be introduced and taught to all children throughout their years in the school system. This level of government intervention, combined with district policy and specific anti-discrimination policy, has been shown to produce the most meaningful change for LGBT students (Taylor et al., 2016). Like many of my urbanite colleagues, I had adapted the old curriculum to introduce the gender and sexuality spectrum prior to the release of the Ministry of Education's update, although this was not often seen in rural areas. Introduction of the curriculum created a social mandate that rural areas and their educators had to challenge their own views of gender and sex.

Unfortunately, the change was met by immediate backlash from conservative families and media outlets; while families protested and removed their kids from classrooms, conservative news outlets fanned the flames with publications suggesting that the curriculum advised teachers to divulge the intricacies of sex to their students (Pickles, 2015). Soon thereafter, when the current government took office in the province, the new curriculum was redacted, and a 'snitch line' was put in place to ensure teachers were not using it illegally (Collaco, 2018). Some parents were especially relieved to hear this news, as they made them feel secure that their children were not being fed liberal ideology in their classes. Many of the proponents of repealing the revised sexual education curriculum were people like my own sister: an immigrant person of colour who was concerned about her children being exposed to too much.

Further cuts by the Ford government begin to show a clear pattern of his intentions for the future of education in Ontario. In December 2018, massive cuts were announced across the province, which mainly impacted funding for student programs

surrounding disability, anti-poverty, mental health, and racialized youth (Rizza, 2018). The cuts continued the following month, when changes to provincial loan programs eliminated grant funding and interest grace periods; these represent two major bridges for oppressed populations to access higher education. Slashes to post-secondary funding in the same month left student organizations, namely lobbying and advocacy groups, without secured income, even though sports teams retained funding (Porter, 2019). Ford is currently eyeing full-day kindergarten programming next, which has been proven to improve the overall outcomes of racialized and impoverished children (Hahn, Rammohan, Truman, & Milstein, 2013). Each cut represents a barrier that marginalized populations must now overcome in order to access education. Ford's cuts are not about fiscal responsibility; rather they are about maintaining a hegemony of whiteness and maleness. Michael Dennis examined this phenomenon in the American context, where white, seemingly progressive 'activists' pointed to education as a tool for people of colour to advance, but colonized the way in which people of colour were taught (2001). The actions of the government in Ontario are no different, as they aim to eliminate minorities, namely queer and people of colour, from the political sphere in the future. In the rural sphere, government cuts that affirm stagnant social values further insulates remote areas from change. I turn to Paulo Freire's words in this regard:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (1972).

Though queer populations were previously estimated to be 10% of the world, recent studies have shown that the current number is anywhere from 3-5 times higher (see Kosciw et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). As educators, we cannot ignore such a large group of students who face disenfranchisement from the current social context and governing system. The nature of education is, and will always be, inherently political. Though the government has attempted to silence and further marginalize queer voices, teachers must continue to persevere and find ways to maintain school safety for LGBT youth. This is especially true in education faculties, which are not solely governed by provincial curriculum. Instead of being reliant on a new government implementing yet another sexual education curriculum change, education faculties should be integrating inclusive education praxis throughout all their programming, in addition to providing dedicated instruction time on these topics. While it may represent a small change, promoting a cultural shift, no matter the magnitude, is bound to result in a benefit for teachers, students, and education stakeholders alike.

The literature on the matter is clear: Classrooms and school settings often perpetuate continued victimization of LGBT youth, both by their peers and educators (Kosciw et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). Rural locales usually prove to be greater risks for LGBT youth, particularly those who may not fit gender stereotypes essential to rural identity (Anderson et al., 2015; Kazyak 2011). Nevertheless, having teachers who are prepared to actively support these children, as well as supportive school administration, vastly improves the educational outcome of LGBT youth (Taylor et al., 2016). The challenge then becomes training educators who are ready and willing to take on this task. This research has shown that rural preservice teachers feel they benefit from

guided instruction on the topic, as well as examples of how they can implement it. Without such interventions, the participants in this study felt insecure about their ability, much like other preservice teachers in other areas (Hirsch, 2007). The current political climate in Ontario only serves to amplify the insecurity these teachers face, as the current government's actions legitimize incredibly homophobic and transphobic attitudes. Regardless of the attitudes of politicians in power, LGBT youth are still protected by legislation in Ontario and in Canada, most notably with Bill 13 in Ontario, which explicitly protects children on the basis of sexual and gender identity. LGBT youth cannot suspend their existence based on political climate. Instead, it is up to future educators to help these children reach success despite cultural adversity. Otherwise, educators collectively leave LGBT youth out in the cold.

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## **Appendix A: Letter of Information**

April 2017

Dear Potential Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study called, Out in the cold: Examining northern and rural teachers' preparedness for teaching LGBT students, that aims to assess your ability as a pre-service teacher on topics related to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans (LGBT) children in classrooms. While the province of Ontario and several educational institutions have committed to ensuring equity for all students, students still feel at risk; as evidenced by school climate surveys (see Every Class in Every School, EGALE, 2012). LGBT youth not only feel victimized by their peers in their schools, but they also may feel that their teachers are not doing enough to protect them.

This study requires new teacher graduates who currently reside and intend to continue their residence in Northern Ontario. If you fit this description, your participation would greatly benefit this study.

If you choose to participate, this study has two phases. The first phase involves attending a 2-hour workshop at Lakehead University, entitled EDUC 7139 – LGBT Youth in the Classroom. This workshop is normally run by the Department of Professional Development for a fee of \$45 CAD and includes a certificate of completion. By participating in this study, you will receive the certification from this workshop for

free. This workshop provides learners with a foundational knowledge of LGBT topics and anti-oppressive teaching strategies.

Phase two of this study involves participation in a short group interview. During this interview, participants will reflect upon the knowledge presented in the workshop, and contrast it with their experiences in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree program. Though the interview will be audio recorded, I will personally transcribe and remove all identifying information of the participants before conducting data analysis or any publication. Participation in this interview is intended to be confidential and anonymous, barring the knowledge of your fellow participants.

Confidentiality and security are of the utmost importance for this study. Audio recordings will be transcribed and sent to you, the participant, for verification before they are deleted. Transcribed files will be stored on a secure, encoded USB drive, as well as on an offline password protected computer. This data will remain secured for five (5) years, after which point it will be erased or securely disposed of.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time without penalty. If you agree to participation, one request is that you keep the information discussed in the group interviews, as well as your fellow participants, confidential. Some interview questions ask you to share details about your experience completing a degree with Lakehead University. Some examples of questions are:

- What are some things you learned about LGBT youth in your time completing a B.Ed. degree?

- Do you feel you were adequately taught about LGBT children and issues in your degree?
- What was a new idea or strategy you learned in the workshop?
- How do the ideas presented in the workshop contrast to your experiences in your education degree?

These questions and their answers will be done using a nominal interview technique, in order to protect your confidentiality and answers from being tied to you, as a participant. Any information discussed in this group interview will not be anonymous, and will no way impact your standing/degree with Lakehead University. As an added level of precaution, the interviews will take place after the completion of your final placement.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please read and sign the attached consent form.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone (766-7114) or by email at [ajeethan@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:ajeethan@lakeheadu.ca). This project is being conducted as a Master's level research project, and is being completed under the supervision of Dr. Gerald Walton. He may be contacted via email: [gwalton@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:gwalton@lakeheadu.ca).

This study has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8283 or [research@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:research@lakeheadu.ca).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Anthony Jeethan, OCT

## Appendix B: Consent Form

April 2017

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read and agree to the terms presented in the *Information Letter* for Anthony Jeethan's research study entitled *Out in the cold: Examining northern and rural teachers' preparedness for teaching LGBT students*.

By signing this form, I acknowledge and understand the following:

- This study involves a workshop and group interview, both of which are necessary to collect data to benefit the final research.
- For participating in the complete study, I will receive a certificate of completion for *EDUC 7139 – LGBT Youth in the Classroom* (\$45 value)
- Social change, and evaluating measures of change require honesty and frankness. Though the questions involved may ask me to critique my experiences, please know that this information will not be tied to me in any way.
- There will be audio recordings of the group interview sessions. These recordings will be stored in encrypted offline systems for a minimum of five years, after which point they will be deleted.
- Audio recordings, and their transcripts, will be scrubbed of identifying information. I have the option of using my own pseudonym, otherwise I will be automatically assigned one. Audio recordings will be pitch modified (modification of the audio file to my identity in the case of a breach).

- The workshop and group interview sessions involve contact with other participants. I will not disclose the identity of these participants to anyone outside of the research pool. I understand that photos and other recording methods by participants are not permitted during the workshop or interview.
- The information shared in during this study may be used in the future for publication purposes. In that event, participants will be notified; however, all information will be put forth and published anonymously.
- If you would like to view a completed copy of the study, please provide your email in the space provided. \_\_\_\_\_

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Researcher's Signature

Date

## **Appendix C: Workshop Outline and Description**

This workshop explores the difficulties faced by LGBT+ youth in the classroom relating to heteronormativity and homophobia. Through defining the identities of LGBT youth, as well as a positive and negative space, participants will learn how to create safe, caring environments for students, regardless of their identities. Case studies will be used to illustrate the common problems faced by LGBT youth in classrooms, as well as how these problems effect everyone in the classroom, school, and community.

### **Workshop Overview**

1. Introductions
2. Workshop Goals and Purpose
  - a. Instructor introduces themselves and the goals of the workshop:
  - b. Participants will co-construct other goals that they'd like to meet with this workshop
3. Overview of Legislation in Ontario schools
4. Building the Spectrum
  - a. Participants will share their current understandings of sexuality and gender, in order to build a spectrum. The instructor will fill in gaps
5. Defining gender and pronouns
6. Slurs vs. Identities
7. Classroom heteronormativity
8. Defining 'Out-ness' and its importance
9. Building classroom safe spaces
10. Building inclusive school climate

11. How to address situations of bullying
12. When to address directly, and when to seek help
13. Case Studies
14. Open Q & A

### **Case Studies Used in the Workshop**

**Case #1 – Student interactions.** As a middle school teacher, you pair your students off to work on an assignment. When one student, Reya, moves her chair towards another, Becky, you notice that Becky gives her a dirty look. When you go to intervene, Becky yells, “I don’t want to work with that dyke! Everyone will think I’m one too!”

Prompts: What issues are present in this scenario? How would you respond to each of the students involved? What about the other students in the classroom? How would you escalate this situation with your colleagues?

**Case #2 – Administrative concerns.** As a middle school teacher, you are familiar with Bobby. Bobby is a gender non-conforming student and often acts or dresses in a traditionally feminine manner. On this particular day, Bobby decides to come to school wearing a dress and heels. His art teacher hears his peers teasing him, and sends him to the office. The principal then approaches you, his homeroom teacher, and informs you that Bobby should be sent home to change.

Prompts: What is the main issue in this scene? How do you address the student? What immediate actions should you take? What frameworks should you establish for the future? What should you do for your staff?



**Case #3 – Building curriculum.** As a social sciences teacher, you are aware that your board is trying to highlight LGBT diversity and inclusion into the curriculum. Your principal approaches you to find ways to include these topics in your current curriculum.

Prompts: How does inclusive curriculum benefit students? How can you incorporate inclusivity? What issues may arise during these lessons? Where could you seek assistance in this task? How can you ensure other colleagues do similar lessons?

**Case #4 – Assisting student transitions.** As a counselor, you have a student approach you in your office. You know this student as Barbara; however, they have disclosed to you that they are transgender. They are now referred to as Tyler, and use they/them as pronouns. They would like to be known as Tyler by their peers, but have also mentioned that their family is not supportive of their transition.

Prompts: How should you first respond to the student? How do you make sure this student feels safe to transition in the school environment? How can you help the student address their transition with their family? Should the family be consulted? How can you support the student going forward?

## **Appendix D: Interview Questions**

- I. Welcome – Introduction of Moderator
- II. Topic and Group Interview Overview
- III. Guidelines
  - a. No incorrect answers, all answers are different opinions
  - b. Since we're recording, only one participant speak at a time
  - c. Listen respectfully
  - d. Please do not use cellphones or iPods during the interview
  - e. Talk to each other, not exclusively to the moderator
1. Question 1 – What did you find interesting about the workshop?
2. Question 2 – What are some things you learned about LGBT youth during your time in the B.Ed. program?
3. Question 3 – What was a new technique or strategy you learned from the workshop?
  - a. Participants will write down the answer to this question on a sheet of paper, and give it to the instructor.
  - b. The instructor will read all answers and then have the participants rank the answers in order of importance.
4. Question 4 – Of the ranked suggestions, which were taught to you during your time at the B.Ed. program?
5. Question 5 – If they were taught, did the knowledge from the workshop enhance your understanding of the topic?

6. Question 6 – Was there any information that was given to you during the workshop that contradicts what you were taught during the B.Ed. program?
  - a. If there are multiple answers to this question, it will be done in a ranking style, as in question 3.
7. Question 7 – How do you will apply the knowledge of the workshop?
8. Question 8 – How would you describe your knowledge of LGBT topics before the workshop? What helped you develop this knowledge?
9. Question 9 – How comfortable do you feel with LGBT topics now? What influenced your feelings?
10. Question 10 – Do you think this type of professional development should be mandatory for teachers? Why?
11. Question 11 – If you had the opportunity to speak directly with the faculty about LGBT content knowledge, what would you say to them? How could they improve?
  - a. If there are multiple answers to this question, it will be done in a ranking style, as in question 3.